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    - Simmons, Esmeralda, Oral history interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu, December 15, 2016, Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.03; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Oral History Interview with Esmeralda Simmons
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.03
Interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu at Medgar Evers College on December 15, 2016 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

OKECHUKWU: OK, it is December 15th. This is Amaka Okechukwu, interviewing Esmeralda Simmons at Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College. We are at Bedford, between Eastern Parkway and Lincoln Place. So, if you could, Esmeralda, if you could introduce yourself just by stating your full name, your birthdate, and where you were born.

SIMMONS: OK. Esmeralda Simmons. I was born on [date redacted for privacy], 1950, at Kings County Hospital. I grew up in Crown Heights, in what was then called South Crown Heights, and spent my entire life in Brooklyn except for five years stranded in Queens. I now live in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

OKECHUKWU: So, tell me about Crown Heights growing up. What are some memories you have of Crown Heights?

SIMMONS: Well, I, I— my family moved to 162 Troy Avenue, which is part of the Albany projects, when I was born, so I actually -- Before then, we lived in 180 Troy Avenue. And so we stayed there, and I have very fond memories of playing in the brand new housing development. You know, we had a brand new playground, and life was pretty sweet in those years. We didn't have preschool or anything like that, so until the age of five, I basically was home with my mother, and my siblings, and then at five years old I was registered -- let me get that straight -- oh, maybe I wasn't even five. I think I was -- yeah, I was turning five, I was probably four years old when I started the first grade at St. Matthews Elementary School. St. Matthews Elementary School -- the building is still there, but it is no longer an elementary school. I actually believe it is now a charter school. It's located on Utica and Lincoln Place, right behind St. Matthews Roman Catholic Church. I went to that school from first grade until the middle of the— my

third year, and that year, which would have been 1957, my family moved to Lefferts Avenue between Nostrand and Rogers to a two-family house that my parents had purchased, and that was our first home. And I lived at 290 -- did I say 290? I lived at 290 Lefferts Avenue until I was -- till 1965, and then we moved one block over to a one-family; 278 Sterling Street, between Nostrand and Rogers. When I moved to Lefferts Avenue, I spent the rest of the year at St. Matthews, so I spent the semester at St. Matthews, and then, in the beginning of the new year, I moved -- transferred to St. Francis of Assisi, which is located at Lincoln Road between Nostrand and New York Avenues, and I spent up to the eighth grade in that school -- very different situation in Crown Heights. The Crown Heights that I knew in the Albany projects was basically mostly White and— with some Hasidic Jewish people right around the Eastern Parkway area. There was a very famous restaurant, Jewish restaurant, on the corner of Utica Avenue and Eastern Parkway, and I'm trying to get the name out of my head -- Dunesberg, or something like that -- which was, you know a, a regular restaurant, but it was huge, and they had a wide assortments of desserts and things that children like, you know, so I remember going there once or twice with my family, and maybe I'll get the name out of my head. And, I think it's a clothing store now -- it's on the second floor, right on the south -- aww no, the southwest corner of Eastern Parkway and Utica Avenue. And, so my days were spent in a very cozy Black community in the Albany projects, and the school was integrated -- there were White students in the school, it was a Catholic parochial school -- White students in the school, and right around the corner from the school, there were still little Jewish shops, and, you know, nut stores -- in that area of Crown Heights. When we moved to South Crown Heights, there weren't any Lubavitch Hasidic Jews on that side of Empire Boulevard. Instead, it was Irish, Italian, and a few Polish folks. The— There was German delis, Italian shoemakers, Italian bakeries, Ebinger's was around the corner. There was a little -- not little -- there was a pretty well-used stationary store called the Inkspot. There were little luncheonettes, and all these stores were owned by European ethnic groups. As opposed to before, where the stores were basically owned by Jewish -- on the other side

of Empire Boulevard. I could walk to school -- the school -- the neighborhood -- when we moved to the neighborhood, we were only the third Black family on the block, so we were integrating the block, and the school, and I was one of three Black students in my class. There were less than 20 Black students at the school--

OKECHUKWU: This is St. Francis--

SIMMONS: St. Francis of Assisi. St. Matthews was basically mostly Black, with a few -- a few White kids. But, St. Francis was in a White neighborhood, and same order of nuns -- Sisters of St. Joseph -- but it was night and day, to speak. And there was a tremendous amount of hostility by some of the nuns and some of the lay teachers, and as I went through school— even all the way up to the seventh and eighth grade, when I was getting ready to graduate— there was a lot of overt racism. So I remember days, we would go home -- this is, now you know how long ago this was -- 1950, you went home for lunch. You know, some kids brought their lunch with them, but most of us lived in the neighborhood, and could go home for lunch. So you know, I only lived three blocks away. Of course we could go home for lunch; and lunch was only half an hour, 45 minutes, so you had to go home, eat lunch, and get back and— in time for one o'clock. So -- and we got out at 12:15. So, you know, you rushed home, you ate lunch, and you went back, and the sooner you got back, the more time you had to play in the schoolyard. But, going home the first and second years, there were several times -- more than once, more than twice, more than a dozen times -- there would be a couple of boys -- some from the school, and some not -- who would meet me and my sister -- or sisters, there were three of us in the school at the same time -- and would basically meet us and yell out the n-word, and, you know, sometimes chase us home, and you know, threaten us and whatever -- you know, "Go back to Africa," that kind of stuff. When I was involved in student activities, going even further into the area where Wingate High School was built when I was in that neighborhood, so, we would -- the basketball team of the grammar school would practice outdoors in good weather at Wingate basketball field and-- basketball courts, I should say -- and going through that neighborhood, which was largely Italian, there was even more hostility. You know,

"What are you doing here? Get out the neighborhood." You know, I was basically -- I wasn't easily shaken as a child, so you know -- and I had plenty of mouth on me, so I would give them a couple words -- I didn't know slander words or anything like that, but, you know -- and you know, I'd say, "What are you going to do about it? I live here too." That kind of stuff, you know. As we stayed on the block, there was a tremendous amount of white flight going on. So, for most of the time that we were there, we still had one White neighbor. The neighbor on the other side moved out, another Black family moved in. So by the time I was an adult living, you know, between Sterling Street and Lefferts Avenue, the neighborhood basically had flipped, so instead of there being a majority of black -- White neighbors, there was a majority Black neighbors, a lot of Caribbean folks, and there were a small number of White folks that remained. Even the rental housing on Rogers Avenue; that had flipped over too, and that was almost the last to flip, because they were a rent-controlled building. But they— even those folks moved after a while. So it was, it was pretty traumatic. By the time I was in eighth year, in the eighth grade, going back toward the Albany project area, things had gotten very, very tough in that area. There were a lot of gang activity. My mother wouldn't even want me to go and visit some of the friends, the family friends and stuff, because many of the young people that we grew up with as little children had gotten involved with drugs or other, you know, very serious, negative stuff. I remember one of the, one of the closest persons to me when I was very young, you know, became addicted to drugs, and contracted AIDS from needle, from needle use— and I didn't know any of this until I was grown— and he had gotten himself back on his feet, only then to later die of AIDS, you know? It's very sad, very, very sad. But most of the members of the family that we were closest to -- my mother, one of my mother's best friend -- most of those folks did pretty well, went to college, and everything like that and I, and I still run into them today, you know. We have mutual friends, etc. But, there was a really rough period in Albany projects in the '60s and the early '70s, and I think that was already beginning to happen, and that was part of the reason, besides the fact that my parents were very upwardly mobile -- my father was a college graduate,

he went to Manhattan College up in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx, and my mother was a housewife and she was a college graduate, and both were very intelligent, and they were very, very persistent about us getting the best education possible, and not being in harm's way, and my father in particular did not like what he saw was going— happening with the teenagers. When we were young, the teenagers were already getting into the, into a bad scene in the projects, so we moved out. It was very isolating. The best friends I had were my siblings -- my sisters, and later on my brother was born. I did have some White friends, and there were a few Black folks that moved into the neighborhood; we became friends with them. But my best friend throughout, all the way through high school, was a little White girl that lived around the corner on Rogers Avenue who was Irish-English, and who was one of the few people that talked to me when I first moved into the new school, you know, so we became friends and we stayed friends all the way through high school, even though she went to one high school -- one Catholic high school, and I went to a different Catholic high school.

The neighborhood itself; for quite— for a while, the small shops and the coziness in the neighborhood remained, and then there was a complete abandonment of the neighborhood, I would say in the late -- in the '70s going into the '80s, and stores were -- You know, the bakeries closed, the -- probably every store closed except for Tony's Meat Market on the corner of Lefferts Avenue and Nostrand Avenue, which remained 'til today -- and a cleaners. But, growing up in the neighborhood was, as I said, very isolating. But by the time I was an adult, 18, it became mostly Caribbean immigrants, and, you know, you could get a patty, you could get -- you know. There were places to go where you didn't feel like you were alone. The high— the junior high school which was one block away, which was called Lefferts Junior High is now called— Of course, I'm going to forget what it's called. I forget the new name of the school. It's on Empire Boulevard between Nostrand and New York Avenue. You know, as a teenager, I would hang out in the handball courts, etc., with the other young people, and by that time it had become mostly a Black place where youths could spend some quality time, playing sports, etc. That was all the way, I would say, from the time I was about 16 and on.

There actually then became social places I could go in the neighborhood, without going all the way over to Rutland Road and Midwood Street and Maple Avenue, which was called Doctors' Row at that time. The other Doctors' Row, which was on President Street, between New York Avenue and Kingston, which was made famous by Killens' book -- there's a book about the Black society of Brooklyn -- that will come to me before -- Dubrow's; that's the name of the restaurant, D-U-B-R-O-W-'-S, Dubrow's. And Killens' book is called -- that's not coming to me right now. OK, but anyway, the Center for Black Literature is right around the corner from here -- I can always go ask them. He's like their patron saint. But he wrote a whole book about the Black bourgeoisie of Crown Heights— *The Cotillion*, that's what it's called— talking about the cotillions that they had, and all the things that they did, and, you know, he gave the Jack and Jill Club another name, you know -- All about how Black folks interacted; who were Black Americans, basically, who were of middle to upper class, and these were basically professionals. My father was a professional too, but you know, he didn't come from a wealthy family. Both my mother and my father emigrated from St. Croix on the U.S. Virgin Islands, and neither of them came from wealthy families, so we had very little to do with the up— the Black upper class people, until some of them started inviting us to some of their events. But, I didn't know anybody, so [laughter] you know -- one of my younger sisters actually got to know some of the people a little bit better than I did. So we— I had very little to do with some of those folks, even though a few of them actually went to St. Francis, because they lived on Maple Street and Midwood -- Midwood Street -- that Doc, that Doctors' Row over there, that Black Doctors' Row. One of the things that I remember very clearly is that one of the joys of being in Crown Heights was -- this is before the West Indian Day Parade and everything else -- was the ability to go to the Brooklyn Children's Museum, and the ability to be so close to Prospect Park and the Botanic Garden. Those were safe areas. Everybody could go there. As I said, some of the playgrounds were not welcoming. Even some of the streets -- now, the ultra-conservative Lubavitch were there already, and Kingston Avenue -- their community was really solely contained between Empire -- I'm sorry, between -- yeah, between

Empire Boulevard and Eastern Parkway, and New York Avenue and about up to Albany Avenue, in that area. But they had their shops, etc., like that, but you weren't really welcome there either. So, we were sort of boxed in between two very unwelcoming communities, and in order to get to welcoming communities, you had to go through one of these communities. Nostrand Avenue was -- nobody was going to bother you on Nostrand Avenue. If you walked down New York, or you walked down Brooklyn Avenue, you know, you had to deal with the hostility. Interestingly enough, my mother, when she -- her children became a little bit older, you know, so we became a little bit older, and we were all in school -- she became a crossing guard, and the school that she was a crossing guard for was PS 161, which is located on Crown Street between New York Avenue and Brooklyn Avenue, which is right down the block, on the same block, as a Lubavitch girls' elementary school. So, she was a crossing guard for both of these schools, so because she was a crossing guard and they knew her, it became easier for the rest of us to walk up to Crown Street, and then walk up the rest of the way. If we were going to -- our dentist was still on that side of town, you know. We would sometimes go to the library over there. Sometimes we'd go to St. Johns Recreation Center over there, and getting over there became easier because my mother was a crossing guard at that school for quite a few years. I'd say she was their crossing guard at least seven, eight years. Interestingly enough, after we had integrated into the South Crown Heights area, there was -- one of the families that lived -- that went to St. Francis -- turned out to be the children of someone that my mother knew from the time that she grew up in Harlem -- both West Indian immigrants, both new home buyers, and that family lived on Rutland Road, and though I didn't go that way, over that way, a lot, my younger sibling did go over that way, because that way you could socialize, etc. When I became about -- I guess I was about 17 or 18 -- I started going over there for parties and stuff like that, because there was nothing going over where I was. So you could at least go over there, and I started socializing with classmates and stuff, and I had one girl in that area that was also going to St. Brendan's with me. St. Brendan's was a Catholic high school that was about five miles away in Kings Highway area— it was

called Sheepshead Bay now, but it really wasn't Sheepshead Bay, it was the Kings Highway area— located on Avenue O and East 13th Street, and it was very interesting how I wound up being in St. Brendan's— because my sister who went to the same exact grammar school as I did, St. Francis of Assisi— the Catholic high schools were zoned, and so because of our proximity, we were zoned originally for Bishop McDonnell Catholic Girls High School, which was on Eastern Parkway between Franklin and Classon. It's now St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf. But that was one of the most famous girls' high, Catholic girls' high schools in the country, because it was one of the original Catholic girls' high schools, and it had five different orders teaching in that school, and each order was teaching a different type of subject, and you know, a lot of scholars came out of it. So, I was excited about going to Bishop McDonnell -- my older sister was there, she was a— she was doing very well in the sciences, and a science fair first prize winner and everything like that. To find out that— when it was two years later, when it was time for me to go to high school— the zoning for the high school had been switched by the diocese so that me and all the other White girls would go to an almost exclusively White girls' high school; another diocesan high school. But all the way over in the mostly Jewish area of Kings Highway, where girls; Catholic girls from Bath Beach, Sheepshead Bay -- there were Catholic schools around there -- and the Kings Highway area, the Midwood area, they would all go to that school. So that's where I went to school; high school, and I had to tran--

OKECHUKWU: Do you know what motivated that rezoning?

SIMMONS: Oh, absolutely. [laughter] I asked about it. I asked why was I going to St. Brendan's. I mean, I said I wanted to Bishop's, and they said I couldn't go to Bishop because complaints of the parents in St. Francis -- because Bishop McDonnell was turning mostly Black and Latino at that point. Because all the schools on the northern part of Brooklyn -- Catholic schools -- would sent their girls there, and the northern part of Brooklyn -- Bed-Stuy, the Bushwick area, Fort Greene, everybody would be going to Bishop McDonnell, and they didn't want their girls to be going over there, so they petitioned to have their girls go to another Catholic high school. Now, mind you, the

boys were still going to Bishop Loughlin in Fort Greene. The girls however, went, we went, you know, an hour on the bus, or, you know, 15, 20 minutes on the train if you walked all the way down to the -- it was a D train then, now it's the Q train. If you walked down to the Prospect Park station— which was a good ten-minute walk, or seven-minute run in the morning— or I could get a bus, the B49, but that took an hour, and then I still had to walk like ten blocks. So in the first couple years, I took the bus, and then I— my— The same classmate that went to St. Francis with me told me that she lived closer -- she lives in Doctors' Row over there by Midwood Street. She told me that she took the train, and it was really quick; two express -- three express stops. So I wound up taking the train too. My mother was not too happy about that, but— she thought the bus was safer— but I said, look, it takes 15 minutes when I get on the train, and then I got to walk back. I'd rather do that than walk— you know, all the way— those blocks just to pick up the B49, and spend an hour on the bus. But the motivation was definitely White parents not wanting their girls to go to school with what, with Black girls, and the same prejudice that I ran into in St. Francis was still there. The principals were— always treated our family quasi-kindly, but I have a story about that, too. They had a lot of respect for my father, because he went to a Catholic college, and you know, there weren't too many college-educated people that were parents at the school to begin with. So, they respected him, but the bias against black folks was very, very strong. I'll tell you one story which -- it's probably a precursor for my becoming a civil rights lawyer. By the way, I think that is exactly why I became a civil rights lawyer and deal with racial justice, because of my integration of every school I went to after St. Matthews. You know, St. Francis, St. Brendan's, Hunter; all of them White schools, all of them, major integration issues. I didn't get there because of, of any -- there was no such thing as affirmative action. I got into all of these schools because of good grades, and because I excelled, yet met with tremendous amount of prejudice. [Interview interrupted.] I'm sorry about that.

OKECHUKWU: Okay.

SIMMONS: All of my siblings did very well in St. Brendan's, because our parents were very,

very strict about us being A students. But the sibling right under me; my sister Joanne, she was a brainiac -- brilliant. She's now Dr. Joanne Daly; she's a physician. She was the top student at that school from the first grade, from the time she was in the first grade. However -- I mean, 99 averages. However, when it came to her being valedictorian, the— I asked Joanne, you know, "Well, are you valedictorian?" She said, "No, she named some other student." I said that, "She doesn't have the same grades as you." So, I went -- I didn't ask my parents. I went to the principal's office, and I said, "How come my sister's not a valedictorian? She is the top student of the grade." And the principal said, "That's not what I was— that's not what I was told. I was given this name, and this student," and this student had like a 95 average. I said, "My sister has a 99 average!" She looked into it, she saw that in fact that was true, and she changed it. But, that went on the whole year, all the years we were there. Whenever there was some sort of honor, or whatever, they would skip over me and my sisters to whoever the White student was underneath us. There was a lot of anguish when I became class president for my, for my class— for my, for my particular class— and a lot of anguish when— for First Holy Communion, at like seven, eight years old! This is the level of bias, you know. People were very angry that I got to lead the First Holy Communion procession out, down the aisle, you know. I was the shortest student, and I knew how to take directions, OK? I always led the class everywhere. You know, I was used to leading the class. They put me there, and I was the shortest thing to be found. But the hostility of the parents, you know, to the fact that we were getting anything, deserved. That's because they saw everything that we got as taking away from what their, what their kids got. So, you know, that went on and on and on, to the point where, you know, I recognized it.

I remember one, one teacher I had in the fourth grade -- and remember, I went there in the third grade -- and in the fourth grade I had a lay teacher-- Who was it? No, no, it wasn't a lay teacher. I had a nun that hated my guts, hated me. She would never call on me, and I always sat right up front -- I mean, I'm short, I would sit right up front -- she would never call on me. She would always try to give me a grade that I didn't

deserve, to the point where I had to tell my parents that they had to come up there and talk about her, because she is really, you know, doing me in. And my parents -- you know, my parents did go up, and that, you know, the changing of grades and stuff like that stopped, but she made it very clear that she was not happy teaching a Black student, at all. You know, she didn't come here to teach Negroes, you know? And while that was not true of all the religious folks, religious orders and— that were teaching -- because it was mostly nuns there when I was there -- you know, I met it in high school too, you know. In high school— but I was junior by then, so that must have been 1966; 1966, 1967— because of what was happening in the Civil Rights Movement, and because the Catholic schools were so segregated, the Catholic diocese started something called a high school inter— interracial committee, where they would take -- pick students, Black students -- no, students; Black and White students from their high schools that were leaders to come together to talk about integration -- mind you, not integrating them! They're not doing anything for the school, but they want this group of stars to come together and meet. So we would, and I met other students from other Catholic high schools, and represented my school for two years, and some of those folks are still— I'm still friends with now. And we all talked, you know, not -- we joked about it, but it really wasn't funny, about how limited our experiences were because of the level of racism. I was very, very upset at times in high school. Grammar school, you know, no, but high school, I said, "How come I'm not hearing anything about Black people?" I mean, everything we learned was about Europe -- every single, every single thing. There was not even a celebration of Black History Month. There was nothing, except, you know, pictures of Africans being chained, and brought to this country -- nothing about our heritage, nothing. So, when I got a chance to go to college, notwithstanding a scholarship to a Catholic high— Catholic college, I said, "No, I'm going to go to a coed, public college," and I wanted to go to NYU where I had a scholarship, but my father told me it would be better if I went to Hunter, because tuition's free, you don't have to worry about keeping up your scholarship. So, I think that my last act of submission. I left the house when I was 18 years old. I moved out.

So, [laughter] because I was a rebellious young person.

OKECHUKWU: Before we get to college, do you remember what your parents' feelings were about -- you know, they raised these really ambitious children that did really well in school, and were dealing with all of -- you know, integrating the school --

SIMMONS: Oh, I didn't tell you what my father said. I'm supposed to tell you that. I left that out. Sorry— I thought of it, but I— it slipped me. When I told my father and mother about the nun on the fourth grade, he did go up, and my mother did stop by regularly, and she was very clever at what she did, so she would bring some of her, some of her goodies, you know -- she wasn't a baker, but she would bring some of her excellent cooking. So they were always happy to see her, and nuns were used to getting gifts and stuff like that -- but my parents sat me down and, and said, "Look, this is what it is. You're going to have to learn to excel notwithstanding." They didn't call it racism -- notwithstanding the discrimination, the bigotry, the -- prejudice is the word he liked -- "notwithstanding the prejudice," you know. I said, "Yeah, but," you know, "What am I supposed to do?" I said, "You're, you're supposed to--" He said, "Do so well that they can't deny you." Well, I said, "Well, that's not fair, it's not fair," and of course, I'm going on and on about fair -- and that was the first time I heard "Life is not fair." And he told me a story about him being the best student at his college, as an accountant, and excelling, and getting all the honors, and then when it came time to graduation, how he was not -- this was the first time he told me one of his stories -- he was not invited to join a single accounting firm in the city. And instead, he was still working at Yankee Stadium selling hot dogs, when his colleagues, who were there in the boxes for the accounting firms ordering hot dogs, would say, "What are you doing here, Frank?" He said, "This is what I have to do to support my family." And he didn't get an accounting job until he got a civil service job with the state. So he told me, "Look, life isn't fair, this is what happens -- I've gone through a lot, your mother's gone through a lot. You're going to have to go through a lot. You just have to deal with it in this society. This is how this society is." And, you know -- and that, you know, the stiff upper lip thing, you know -- and that's exactly what I did, then -- a stiff upper lip, you

know, nothing phased me -- I just ignored, you know, remarks. When teachers were fair, they were fair. When they weren't fair, I would do my own quiet confrontation. I wasn't loud, but I did my own quiet confrontation to let them know that this is not correct. There's something wrong here. And usually, once I confronted them, and would mention, "Well, you know, I'm going to have to go see the principal about this," they said, "I don't think that's necessary," and they would correct their own ways. Because at that point, the Civil Rights Movement was going on. At that point, there was -- Adam Clayton Powell was the head of Ways and Means, and I remember how ridiculed he was at the school when he fell from grace, and how they wanted me to— What do they— what's the best way to put it? — you know, deny him, you know. And I said, "What he did was not right, but I heard him say that, you know, this has been going on, you know, and White Congresspeople are doing this -- I'm not saying it's right, but why is he being treated differently?" And, you know, and at the same time, you know, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, and my— I had very little— You know, obviously I was still in grammar school when JFK was assassinated, and -- oh, this is a good remark. I remember one of the Italian boys said that if it wasn't for "N's," "If it weren't for the niggers, he would be alive today, because he was trying to help you folks," that's why he got assassinated. And everybody in the school was very attached to him, because he was the first Catholic president. So, his being killed, right after he announced the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 -- no, I'm sorry, the Civil Rights -- right after he announced the Civil Rights Bill in 1963, before it was passed, you know— there were repercussions, you know; not direct repercussions, you know, but definitely enough for some smart-alec in my class to say, you know, we're the reason why he got killed.

Other recollections about the Crown Heights neighborhood that I think were --

OKECHUKWU: What were the boundaries when you were [unintelligible]?

SIMMONS: Oh, that's a great -- that's a great question -- that's a great question. I have something else to say too. Remind me to say something about Bed-Stuy. The boundaries of Crown Heights when I was growing up was basically Atlantic Avenue to Parkside, and Washington Avenue, you know, bounding the Botanic Garden, all the

way over to, like, Buffalo. So that little park there that's, where they start the West Indian Day Parade, on Buffalo and Eastern Parkway? That was like the outer boundary going west. There was some fudging of Fulton Street versus Atlantic Avenue, but I remember very clearly that there was an uproar in Crown Heights when the federal government declared an urban renewal area, the Bedford-Stuyvesant urban renewal area to go all the way to Empire Boulevard. So all of that was being considered Bedford-Stuyvesant, and there was, like, Black families outraged, because Bedford-Stuyvesant at that point was like the poorest of the poor. "We don't want to be associated with that," and there was class differences. Not to say that there weren't middle-class families living in Bed-Stuy, because there always were. But the people in Crown Heights and in Doctors' Row down on Midwood and Maple Street, they deliberately moved -- like, my father moved away from Bedford-Stuyvesant, moved away from the Albany Projects or whatever, to this area. So there was a real outrage about the entire -- almost the entirety of Crown Heights being thrown into Bedford-Stuyvesant for this federal grant for urban renewal. By the way, this is the same urban renewal that took in the Barclay Center. It's the same exact urban renewal that caused the -- At that point, where the Barclay Center is now, there was supposed to be urban renewal there, and so they condemned all this land, and this was even before the Barclay Center condemnation, you know; eminent domain. So this has been going on for quite a while, but I remember -- and I said to myself, "What is all this?" I mean, "They are calling this Bedford-Stuyvesant. This is not Bedford-Stuyvesant." They said, "Really?" The same Jack and Jill folks, and -- were just getting completely -- I said, "Well, this neighborhood is Crown Heights, so I don't know why you're getting so excited. It is what it is." And they said, "No, once they start calling it that --" What they really meant is, once they start calling it that, poorer folks will move into the neighborhood. They had no idea that there was going to be another Caribbean immigration wave, and that that wave would in fact be the one that populated Crown Heights, rather than a move of poor Blacks from Bed-Stuy and Fort Greene. So, in the mean-- at the same time, remember there is, there is the first wave of Caribbean people,

which were -- my parents are in the middle of that, because my grandmother, grandparents were the first wave. So, they came in the middle of that -- I shouldn't say that. They came at the end. My father came in the middle, my grandmother— My mother came -- she came in with my grandmother. So she came in right around 1927, right at the height of -- right before the crash, and lives in the Depression, and everything, in Harlem. My father moved to Harlem when he came out of the service -- he was in the Army for World War II, and that's -- after World War II, he moved to New York, and he lived in Harlem, and from Harlem, they moved for a very short period of time to Washington Heights, because they could have their own place, and they moved from Washington Heights to the Albany Projects.

OKECHUKWU: Do you know why they moved to Albany Projects?

SIMMONS: Yeah, they were able to get into a new— into new public housing. That was like a dream come true, to have a multi-bedroom place -- and at that point, there was only one child. So I was on my— on the way, and so they were happy to move in. No, I wasn't on the way. No, I wasn't. So, that was -- yeah, I guess I had to be on the way. So, they weren't at 180 for very long, because I was born, and when I was born they went— we moved almost immediately into 162, and -- My sister's only 18 months older than me, so it wasn't a very long period of time, and she was -- they moved there right after she was born, so they couldn't have been in 180 but for a very short period of time -- and 180 wasn't a new building. One sixty-two was the new building. So, that's why they moved, for -- to better themselves, for better housing. But as I said, my father wasn't happy being there, so as soon as he could save up enough money working three jobs, we then moved to Crown Heights. The things that I remember the most about Crown Heights were mom-and-pop stores; absolutely fantastic foodstuffs that could be had. You had, you know as I said, a real German deli; I mean, real German sausages, and coleslaws, and stuff like that--

OKECHUKWU: And where was that?

SIMMONS: Nostrand Avenue between Lefferts Avenue and Sterling Street. In Crown Heights, on Nostrand Avenue, and even on Crown Street, the Jewish delicacy stores;

they used to have the Jewish appetizer stores right there. You didn't have to go over to Kingston Avenue; it was right there, and the dried fruits, and the nut breads, and -- so, you know, the knishes -- I mean, all of these foods that we, that we really, really loved. And the butchers, the baker, the candles; everything was right there, the shoemaker. Everything was there, and I really bemoan the loss of that in our communities now, because it is, it is difficult to get services. Even now with gentrification, what they bring in does not replace the mom-and-pop service, you know? And though they do have some services, they're not -- let's be honest, they're not the same quality as the services that I knew when I was growing up. There was -- for example, there was a shoemaker on Fulton Street, not too -- like, three blocks from my house. I wouldn't even go to him. I went to him twice; both times, wound up getting into an argument about him changing the price, the quality was shoddy, and I said -- and then I found out everybody else doesn't go to him either. I said, so I said, "Wait, so now I've got to go 15 blocks this way to go to a shoemaker, or go to Downtown Brooklyn," you know? So that sort of thing is happening, and that is also immigrant population coming in to provide that service, and -- I'm trying to think who he is -- he's a Sephardic Jew, he's not -- the shoemaker, I'm talking about -- he's not a local Jewish folks, or from the Satmars, or the Lubavitch, so -- all right, I'll pause.

OKECHUKWU: So, before we get to Hunter, you mentioned the '60s; being in high school, having this sort of consciousness and being, you know-- Yes.

SIMMONS: Oh, I want to say something else about services in these areas. There were two libraries that we, that wee -- three libraries that we used, public libraries -- all of them Brooklyn Public Library. We went to the library every week -- every single week we were at the library, and when we got old enough, we could go more than once a week. And the purpose of going to the library once a week with my parents was for you to return the book or books you had finished, and get new books, so I was reading like three books a week, you know? At both libraries that I went to, there were Black librarians, and those Black librarians, outside of the people that I would know from my grandmother's house in Harlem -- some of whom were Garveyites, and everything else

-- those Black librarians were the first people that were able to give me anything about my history. You know, I learned about, you know, the first wave of Caribbean people coming in, you know. I wanted to know more about how people came. Since we didn't come in with Southern Blacks, we didn't come over boats here. So I wanted to know, you know; we're obviously Africans -- how did we get to the Caribbean islands, and then, in turn, I learned about how that was a drop off point, etc., and you know, those Black librarians would feed me books. So, both -- the first library was on Eastern Parkway, and the next library was down, almost down the block from the school, from St. Francis -- it was on New York Avenue and Maple Street. So both places -- and I remember, the Black librarian on Maple Street, on, on New York Avenue, she was the first one that said, "OK, I'm not letting you -- you can take out some more of these teenage books that you like to read," because I would read every series there was around, "But I want you to start reading some of these other books." So she gave me Dickens, and James Baldwin, and, you know, and whatever I got, I read. [laughter] You know? So she said, "OK, here's my two recommendations for these weeks," and, you know, whatever it was I read, and I remember my mother said, "What is that?" I said, "The librarian gave that." "OK, fine, you read it. She gave it to you, read it. OK." And, you know, Shakespeare, and, you know, a good mixture, I would say, of Black literature, and American literature, and English literature, even some French -- translated, because I didn't speak French. I read a little French when I got to high school and took French, but my— I guess I did read at least one or two books; *The Blacks*, and another book by that playwright. But those librarians, who I later found out belonged to a national association of Black librarians, they were very deliberate. They were very deliberately there trying to give us a little bit of our culture. My parents, as immigrants, as Caribbean immigrants, did not -- we did Caribbean things. And, you know, we'd go to my— we went to my grandmother every weekend; she was in Harlem, on Fifth Avenue between 118th and 117th Street, and so I knew Harlem. But I really didn't know Harlem the way some Southern Blacks knew Harlem. I knew my tiny little area of Harlem; we weren't allowed to go to 125th Street by ourselves, we weren't

allowed to go up 116th Street, because that was a big drug area. So we stayed in a very particular area, and we spent more time in El Barrio, at the La Marqueta -- which I could have given you a tour of, I was there so often -- than I did associating with Southern Blacks. So, I really didn't know any Southern Blacks until I was in high school, and I met a few, because even some of the folks in Doctors' Rows were Caribbean folks, you know? And then college is when I really came more into touch with more people from the South. We went to the same Catholic churches, you know, so there was no mixing, or mingling, or whatever like that. And I think that my parents were very -- oh, I met some Southern Blacks when I was in that high school interracial group, coali-- what did they call it? -- committee. Yeah, I met some -- and they were -- they found me fascinating, because they had never met a Caribbean person either, and even though I was, you know, second-generation, as they call it -- so they said to me, "Well, what do you consider yourself to be -- a Negro, Caribbean?" I said, "My parents call themselves Negro, I'm a Negro, you know? I'm an American Negro." I had never been to the Caribbean, but all the foods, and stuff, that I knew -- but my mother could cook American too. She was very good at cooking American, because she grew up, she grew up in Harlem. So she could cook soul food, and stuff like that too. But it was, it was -- and that continued all the way through Shirley Chisholm, and all the rest of that -- that strand of Caribbean-centric Brooklyn is very evident today, and that was before the second wave, and it was the early Caribbean-centric people that started the West Indian Day Parade. It wasn't the second wave, you know. Lezama and them, they're first-wave Caribbean immigrants, and even though there were Caribbean folks here forever -- I mean, the first head; Black head of Tammany Hall, he was Caribbean. They've been in New York. We've been in New York forever. That sort of sequestration -- that still remained, that still remained; so the folks on the block that we integrated, all of those folks were Caribbean immigrants. Not one family did I know that wasn't, that wasn't immigrant, and then, when finally, when Black Southerners moved in, that's when I started to know a few of them. But they were really my children's -- my children's friends are those folks, because everybody I knew was either

from Barbados, or Jamaica -- you know. Our neighbor down the block on Lefferts Avenue, he worked at the New York Times, and he would bring us, you know, ginger beer -- Jamaican ginger beer, you know, and stuff like that, and we would share our delicacies with them. But all the kids, of all of those kids, they were all just like us. And so, that was an interesting part of a little bit of Crown Heights that tended to be very, very centric Caribbean. And I'll also mention that we had some -- on my mother's side, because my father's side really wasn't present up here -- on my mother's side, we had some cousins that were in the Nation of Islam, and some cousins that were -- I'm trying to think of the best -- that were part of the Caribbean societies of Bed-Stuy. So, the first time I saw a brownstone, it was with my cousin Maude who was very famous for her mauby [laughter] -- these are the things you remember; her mauby and her curry. So I said to myself -- I asked my mother, "How come her mauby and her curry—" I didn't like mauby, but— "How come her mauby and her curry is what everybody want?" And my mother turned to me and said, "Didn't you see that she's married to an East Indian?" And he was an East Indian Muslim, and she was a member of the Nation of Islam, and so, she said, she already had curry in her blood, but now she got curry twice, so of course we want her curry. [laughter] It's the best curry in the family, you know? And I, I loved that brownstone. It just like, was like a wonder -- a wonderful construction -- those linen alleys, and these little stairways; I just loved it. I loved it, and I said, "When I grow up, I want to live in a house like this," and that's exactly where I live now. I love the brownstone that I live in. And I actually feel like going to -- living in Bed-Stuy now is like the dream of fulfilling my childhood dream of going back home to a Black neighborhood, because -- and this is very significant -- living in Crown Heights was living in a battle zone. There was, there was religious friction, there was ethnic friction amongst Blacks, and there was a racial friction between the White— most of whom were first or second-generation— folks; Italian and, and Irish and Polish, and Black folks. So, my entire growing up was in this war zone, and not riot war zone, but all the subtle things that happened without the signs being up there "For Colored Only," "For White Only." It was just constant racial friction, constant. And by the time

I was a teenager, I was literally sick of what was so obvious to the Black folks living in Crown Heights at that point; the preferential treatment that the Lubavitch got from the police department, and every other service in the city. You know, our garbage would be sitting out there for skip-a-day, and you go to their neighborhood, and you know, there's— people are sweeping the street, city workers were sweeping the street. My mother got even a better clue into it when she became an auxiliary policewoman, after she became a crossing guard. Because they would assign her to guard the women's bathhouse, etc., and she would come home and talk about all this -- police security here, police security there, police -- They had a little post they set up for the police to protect that community, and we were really, really tired of not getting the response that we needed, and that was— I'm talking directly about Black Crown Heights, north and south, all the way over to what's now called Crow Hill. I mean it was, it was really rubbing people the wrong way. At that point, all the elected officials were White, so there was very little we could do to appeal -- We appealed to them, but they were satisfying that community who had bloc votes, and they had designed the districts of the elected officials so that some elected officials had both the Satmars and the Lubavitch, and you could never elect anybody because of their bloc votes -- it was like 8,000 votes there. It just only takes 2,500 to get elected to some, to the, to the Assembly, the City of New York, so it's like, how are you going to get over that? So you know, I spent my entire coming of age in this constant neglect and pushback, and racial strife. And while I can actually say I had a pretty happy childhood, because I was surrounded by my loving family, and my siblings, and you know, books, and you know -- and any kind of club there was in school, I was in it; basketball, choir, glee, whatever -- I did it all the way through high school -- and student government, I was always in student govern— I was very active. So I had a lot of joy -- very athletic, a lot of, a lot of activity -- all of this was on top of this racial strife that was in the neighborhood. Because it was a neighborhood in transition; transition, and resentful transition. People really didn't want to leave. There was a little stronghold over by Wingate; there was a little parish over there called St. Ambrose. It's no longer a parish, or it's closed.

They combined it because the White folks left, and that was an Italian parish; they combined that parish with St. Francis, the parish that I was in. But we would -- as I said, we would go over there to play basketball with the, with the school team, and one of my first summer jobs was being a school counselor for the Catholic youth organization, and they had a school— They had a summer camp, day camp, and I was a counselor— you know, I must have been 14, 15— and I had to walk over there every day, and it was— The same hostility still existed, in that particular area, because Italians had not moved from there, and they were really not -- didn't want to move, they wanted to stay there. But they were very fearful about all these Black folks moving in, and that neighborhood didn't flip until the '80s. Yeah. I mean, there's still some remnants of it now, of what the neighborhood used to be before. But the hostility over there was still very strong. I remember I had classmates that lived over there from St. Francis and-- I'm talking about female classmates. Oh, I didn't mention something about St. Francis that, that is also part of the cruelty of this. So, you went to school with these kids. In the first year or so, I wasn't really invited to any social thing. But by the time I was in the fifth grade, you know, I'd get invited to parties, you know, birthday parties, etc. But seventh and eighth grade, that all stopped. No matter who you were friendly with, their family said, "Absolutely not. I don't want any social intermingling with Black people; particularly," you know, "girls and boys." So I remember how hurt I was, because my White girlfriend, she was getting invited, and she said, "Are you going to the party?" I said, "No, I wasn't invited." And then they stopped inviting her, [laughter] because she was friends with me. And I said to her, "You know, you better stop being friends with me, because you're going to be --" She said, "Ah, they don't like me anyway." And that was actually true -- they really didn't like her. I was much more popular than she was, but she liked me anyway, "Ah, you know, I don't really need to go there." And, you know, she had her own -- she didn't have a lot of friends to begin with. I was really a good friend to her, and she needed a friend -- when she needed a friend, and I remember how hurtful that was. And all of us went through that. And my older sister who was, as I said, 18 months older, she was really crushed, because she didn't start school there until

she was in the fifth grade. So all she met was this, was this social ostracization; being socially ostracized, and no real friends except one Black girl that was in school with her, and they remained friends all the way through high school. And her Black friend, Frances, she didn't go to Catholic high school. She went to Prospect Heights. But they're so close to St., to St— Bishop McDonnell, they could go walk to school together -- it was around the corner. So, my sister had a friend she could rely on, but it was very painful to her. So she would wind up going over to Crown Heights on St. Johns Place where we had cousins, and she would hang out over there. From the time she was in seventh grade, where would we find her? We would find her over in the— hanging out -- let's see -- at Brooklyn Avenue and St. Johns Place. So that's where she would be. You know, where is she? Oh, she's over there at Cousin Rita's house, and Cousin Rita had lots of, lots of kids -- most of them were a little bit older than me. So she had some folks to socialize with, and that was a Black social group for her. You know, so that is— that was a really hard part of growing up in Crown Heights. And, it's still painful till today, and I really believe that that is why, you know, I do the work that I do now. And that is why I'm located on Eastern Parkway and Bedford Avenue, and I can see -- I can look right down and see all the areas that I -- well, my haunts when I was younger. You know, I can see Prospect Park, I can -- I have to practically walk past -- I don't, Medgar Evers doesn't go down as far as Empire Boulevard, but it's only two blocks away. So, you know, I can walk -- my family still owns a home there. So I can walk over to the family house, you know, turn around the corner; go to the post office, hit the good jerk place, hit the good patty place, you know, bemoan the fact that Ebinger's isn't there anymore. Ebinger's doesn't exist in New York City anymore. It was a big local bakery, OK.

OKECHUKWU: Where was Ebinger's?

SIMMONS: Ebinger's was on -- right next to Tony's Butcher Shop. Oh, no, no, right next to the German deli. So that was on Nostrand Avenue between Lefferts Avenue and Sterling Street, and the little luncheonette that served egg creams and stuff was on the corner of Lincoln Place and Nostrand Avenue, and I remember, one time, my mother

sent word to the school that she had to do some emergency thing with my grandmother, so we couldn't come home. So she ran— she told the nuns to give us some money so we could go eat lunch in the luncheonette. So my girlfriend, the same girlfriend -- the little White girlfriend, Geraldine, she said, "Oh, I'll tell them--" There was no phones, no cell phone. "I'll go home to my mother, and then I'll come back and I'll meet you and we can eat lunch here together." And I remember seeing on the menu, "Frappe." I said, "What is a frappe?" And they said, "Oh, it's like a milkshake." I said, "Well, why aren't you calling it a milkshake or a malted?" And they said, "That's because, well, our parents were from France. So we called it frappe, and so it's going to be a—" I said, "Fine, I'll have a frappe." [laughter] But, you know, all of those ethnic groups were still mingling around the area at the time. There wasn't any Conrad's Bakery, you know; that didn't occur until I was in high school. But as I said, but again, that's second wave coming around. And you know, as I said, we didn't have any Black elected officials, but it was -- and even some of the more -- I'm not going to remember the name; there is a Bajan restaurant on the corner of Lincoln Place and Nostrand Avenue that's been there for a long time. But it wasn't there until after I was a grown adult. Now it's like 40 years old, or whatever, 50 years old -- 50, probably, 50 years old.

OKECHUKWU: Glenda's?

SIMMONS: No, this is before Glenda's.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, OK. [inaudible]

SIMMONS: Glenda's, yeah. Glenda's is good too. But I don't remember the name of that, of that restaurant. But you can't miss it, it's got the Bajan colors -- painted Bajan colors on the outside. But the entire landscape -- and I remember my mother was very, very upset when she couldn't get things that she wanted to get anymore. And, you know, there was no more Italian bakery, you couldn't get Italian bread fresh, you couldn't get this, you couldn't -- and these were things that we were just used to having. So, you know, you don't want to buy Italian bread out of the supermarket. Oh, the other thing; the supermarkets all closed. The A&P left, the Bohack left when the neighborhood was transitioning, and we used to have to go all the way over to where Medgar Evers is

now— actually, where Medgar Evers sits— there was a Waldbaum's. Where the Bedford building sits, there was a Waldbaum's. So we used to have to go all the walk, all the way over to Waldbaum's -- I don't know: "Who're we?" I mean, me and my sister. The question is; my mother wasn't going, she'd tell us what to get, and you go on over there and get it. And all the way -- because they basically were -- it was a ghettoization of the neighborhood. They were de-gentrifying it. They were, they were taking -- stripping all the services out of the neighborhood. The stationary store closed, this closed, that closed; you couldn't get anything!

OKECHUKWU: What years was this [inaudible]?

SIMMONS: That was in the '70s. That was in the '70s. And at the same time, there was humongous, humongous transitioning of houses flipping, and white flight, etc., going on. So as the White folks left the— all the services, and the various— They didn't take the post office, but you know, practically everything else that was there except for Tony's Meat Market left, and you had to struggle to just do your everyday business. We were very happy the cleaners stayed, and they stayed for a very long time, but you know, there was -- for a while, it was really a desert. It was a desert. And my mother started bringing food -- this will make you laugh -- my mother started taking care of my grandmother, because she was getting up in age. So she would go up to Harlem -- she was working at the Museum of Natural History by then -- go to Harlem, and bring home— she was driving— bring home all these groceries, fresh vegetables and stuff that we couldn't get— from La Marqueta. Exactly! [laughter] Bring -- and she would be bringing -- she would shop for my grandmother, she would shop for us, and bring the food home, and it was like, "Oh, thank God, we can have, you know, lettuce that's not dead." And then some of the old grocery stores, like where the A & P used to be, a grocery store moved in around the corner from where the A & P used to be -- it's now a Seventh Day Adventist church -- that was on Empire Boulevard between Nostrand and New York, and now, around the corner from there, one of the Latino chains opened up, and switched, you know. It switched; it was Associated— I don't know what it is now— and that's right there on Nostrand Avenue between Montgomery and Empire, right

next to -- I'm not going to remember the name of that great roti shop. Not Sylvia's, is it? I can't remember. Right next to where— one of the older time— one of the first roti shops that opened up. But that didn't happen until like the late '70s and '80s too. And by the late '70s and '80s, I was gone. I was gone. I left -- oh, when I left my parents' home, I moved as far away -- to Hawthorne Street; where I had my own little studio, and I spent two years there, and then I had my first son, moved back into my parents' house, and then from there, me and my husband moved to our first home in Queens, which I left after five years there because it was desolate. They were doing -- That neighborhood was also transitioning, and when I say there was nothing, I mean, there was -- the only thing that was there was a little grocery store and a very bad cleaners. There was nothing there.

OKECHUKWU: What neighborhood was this?

SIMMONS: Jamaica. This is the height of the depression of Jamaica; the house we were in was lovely, but there was no services, and I didn't have a car. We had one car; my husband needed it for a job, his job, so I had to schlepp everywhere with the children on buses, and we were in a two-fare zone, and after five years, I said, "I can't take it anymore. I'm moving back to Brooklyn. Please -- you're welcome to join me." We sold the house to his sister— it was a family house in his family, it was formerly his mother's house, and we bought it from her, and then we gave it to his sister— moved back to Brooklyn, and was renting in Flatbush, various places in Flatbush, until I could move back to Bed-Stuy. And at one point in time, at my mother's request, I moved back onto Sterling Street. Because she had to be full-time at my grandmother's house and my grandfather; they were really up in age then, and needed care, and she was working in Manhattan. So she was staying up there and coming home on the weekends, and I was living in the house, and basically renovating the house, because it needed a lot of care by then. And so she said, "Instead of giving somebody $2,000" -- this is way back then, "No, I'm going to rent a duplex for $2,000." "Take your $2,000 and come back this house, and put the $2,000 into this house;" you know, a new oven, new kitchen, you know, a paint job, floor job. But by the time I left there, and I was only there for about

two and a half years, maybe not even that, I moved from there into my brownstone. I was saving money for the brownstone, and the house was getting— the family house was getting serviced, and my mother was happy, and I said, "That was a real—" I didn't want to move back, you know. You never want to go back home. But the truth of it is, I was the only -- my family was the only family there. My sister was there. My brother had already moved out, he was grown. So we were taking care of the house; it was a good thing. And we still own that house; two ninety Lefferts Avenue, we sold, but 278 Sterling Street we still own.

OKECHUKWU: Tell me about your entry into activism.

SIMMONS: OK. I became active, actually, as a high school student. I wanted to go to the March on Washington; my parents wouldn't let me. [laughter] But I did go out for some of the student-motivated things, and then when I went to college, I became extremely politically active, and politically conscious and aware, and I became involved in the newly-formed Black Student Union, and what was then before Toussaint Louverture Club -- turned into Black Student Union -- I was officer there, and we did student strikes. We were against the Vietnam War. We demanded and had created an Africana Studies department, and Black and Puerto Rican Studies department. We shut down the school, you know. We marched on CUNY central. We joined other student organizations and marched in Brooklyn, and up at Columbia, and one of my friends from the high school interracial committee was at Columbia. So my folks from Hunter went up to Columbia, and we joined in with him and his group. So it was extremely, extremely active; politically active, definitely radical, definitely Black Nationalist and socialist bent, you know, left bent, and never turned back. I mean, you know, doing political prisoner work, went to the Black Panther trial as a court observer -- you know, all this stuff I was doing while I was in Hunter. I had my first son while I was in Hunter, and after I graduated from Hunter, I taught for one year. I had already been accepted into law school, but I -- what do you call it? -- deferred for a year and I— No, that's not right. No, no, no, no, no. No, I didn't -- I taught for -- one year [unintelligible] for a year; one year at a small, Black family-owned independent Black

school called The Family School, which was located in the midst of Crown Heights, on President Street between New York and Brooklyn in one of those mansions. So, their family -- a Black family owned the mansion, they wanted to start a school; it was a preschool. So they started a school right there on the ground floor, and I was teaching -- I was the first-- no, I was a kindergarten teacher. So, I was right out of Hunter; math / Black and Puerto Rican studies major, and I came there. I was looking for a school for my son, in the year I was finishing up some classwork so I could graduate from Hunter, and then after, in that year, I applied to law school, and I went to law school the next year. So in the meanwhile, one summer, I taught here at Medgar Evers; doing remedial math, and intermediate math. Because I knew the math from being a math major. My family basically are math and science people. I was the only person that was really, really good in language arts as well. You know why; if you're reading three books a week [laughter] -- because of the librarians, right? The blessed librarians. And so, I'm saying all this to say that the ties to this community for me are very, very deep. There isn't, but— Maybe there's one or two blocks that I really haven't spent any time on. I mean, some of the blocks right around here, between Nostrand and Washington, I really haven't spent too much— block— time on; Carroll and Crown, between Nostrand and Washington. But practically all the rest of them, oh yeah. Some personal family connections, so our ties are very deep here. We do not intend to sell the family home, we intend to keep it. You know, it'll be passed down to the next generation. My house is going to be passed down to the next generation, and the other house we have in Brooklyn is my brother's house, and that's on, in East Flatbush, and I don't know if we're going to keep that one, but--

OKECHUKWU: Have you been getting pressure to sell?

SIMMONS: Oh, are you kidding me?

OKECHUKWU: Can you tell me about that?

SIMMONS: Tsk, please. I'll tell you about Sterling Street first. There was -- when I was back at Sterling Street doing the renovations at the house, it was like living in Bed-Stuy now. Every day, we would get at least five solicitations, and at that point, most of the

solicitations were coming from the Lubavitch community who was trying to break into Nostrand; west of Nostrand Avenue, OK? They weren't very successful in doing that on our block, but -- There were none on my block, but just one block up, yes. They bought apartment houses, and they bought one and two-family homes between New York and Brooklyn. But, it was block-busting, that's all I can say. It was, like pressure, pressure, pressure, pressure to sell. And then, there was also block-busting going the other way, because remember, my family was there when there was tremendous turnover of the neighborhood to Black. So there was also a major pressure at that point for us to sell; not that— they didn't know we were Black, so they were contacting us knowing we own a house, thinking that they're going to sell to another Black family. And, depressing -- the first one was depressing the price, and then by the '80s, they wanted -- the prices started going up, up, up, up, up, and again, that was when Jewish folks were trying to buy up all the housing; they bought up practically all of Doctors Row, on-- The same house that I was teaching in, that was sold to Lubavitch, and their family moved back to their family house on Ashland Place. They sold that and moved back to their family— original family house. But, doctors and dentists and everybody all along there were being pressured to sell. So it was highly, highly pressured to being -- to sell out, in Crown Heights, basically, to Jewish families -- cash -- and, but as, I learned very early to say, "We're not interested. We're not selling. Don't call us anymore." The same thing is going on now in Bed-Stuy, and the same thing is going on again now on Sterling Street. So I told somebody that my family owns a house on Sterling Street -- they said, "Oh, you're a millionaire!" I said, "Yeah, oh yeah -- land-rich, cash-poor, all right? Please." You know, people get all crazy; they don't understand if you've got to live someplace, and you want to live someplace decent, you hold on to the land that you have, and you don't sell. And that's a very West Indian way of looking at things, but it is -- it served our family well. The real estate; studying the Crown Heights real estate thing is fascinating. It's really fascinating to watch that. And I am going to sort of point you -- yeah, you know, got to read *The Cotillion*; you got to see what he was talking about. You've got to see the blocks and blocks of Black folks

that used to live in Crown Heights that have been pushed out, and the last folks that I knew well— except for my orthodontist, who still lives in Crown Heights— lives on Carroll Street, between New York and Brooklyn. One of my -- one of the other three -- I'm sorry, one of the other four Black girls at St. Brendan's at the same time I was; her mother moved to Crown-- Carroll Street. She used to live in Sheepshead Bay, and her mother bought a house on Carroll Street, and she lives on Carroll Street, and that's— that was a part of Crown Heights. And, she sold her house to a Black couple who was fronting for Jewish folks. [laughter] The only person I know that's still on that block that has not sold their house is the, is my Black dentist, my orthodontist. Further up on Carroll Street, a friend of mine from college; her family still owns a home there and they're not selling. But that's all the way up -- that's like between Troy and Schenectady. So, that whole neighborhood there that had been a Black neighborhood, after, after the non-Lubavitch Jews left. Because Dubrow's was not Lubavitch; this was European Jews that came over, and were conservative, but not Lubavitch. They were pushed out by the Lubavitch. So Dubrow's was not Lubavitch. And when they left, a lot of Black families bought those houses, right there near Utica Avenue, etc., that's part of Crown Heights, and that's— that was pretty stable. I don't know what's going on over there now. I know people that still live there, but I really don't know, you know, what exactly is happening to that neighborhood. By the way, remember I talked to you about that Doctors' Row in South Crown Heights? Well, that Doctors Row was the first part of South Crown Heights to flip back to being White. White families bought over there, and they renamed -- the realtors renamed it "Prospect Lefferts Gardens" -- it was called South Crown Heights. It became Prospect Lefferts Gardens, and a whole bunch of young Whites started buying up those limestones. This is the same Maple Street, Midwood Street, Rutland Road, where there were -- that block, you know, Doctors' Row over there -- some large homes, and a lot of brownstones and limestones. That was the first part of the South Crown Heights community to flip back to being almost all White, and then they started creating their own daycare centers, then their own schools, the whole thing. And when I saw that happening, I said to my mother, I said,

"You know what, it's not even going to be in my lifetime. In my lifetime, this neighborhood is not even going to stay -- it's going to flip back to being a White neighborhood within my lifetime." So, the same anguish that I went through going here -- now, just to go back to the family house [laughter] -- I'm going I have to experience it as a senior citizen, you know? "What are you doing here?" You know? "Why are you here?" So, yeah. I will say that my parents had a lot of courage. My mother went to school in an— in the Italian -- good question. My mother went to school with some Italians in East Harlem— there was a part of East Harlem around 116th that was still Italian— and she went to public school there, because the Catholic school would not admit her in Harlem. So that was the last time my grandmother went to church, OK? [laughter] She was very religious, but she didn't go to church anymore. She said, "I'll go to church when they, when they start treating us right, all right?" But -- I've forgotten what I said-- oh, so my mother was used to this mixed neighborhood stuff, all right. So she was not, she wasn't intimidated by any of this. And remember, we didn't have any of this, any of the Southern experience -- we didn't have all that overt violence. And my parents were very, very leery about the South. When my paternal grandparent settled in North Carolina and really made that his home, and my father would talk about the trips going down there, and going to visit him, and being stopped by the road, you know, by the police, and he said it was just not good. So when we started taking family trips down, I remember for years and years, my parents were afraid to stop anywhere. [Interview interrupted.]

SIMMONS: The Howard Johnson still held the gray roofs, which meant that they were not open to Blacks: Confederacy, it was a signal of Confederacy. We still saw Confederate flags everywhere, and they would have -- you know, there used to be a guide for people to go down South, where they could stop. They didn't have the guide, because we were West Indian, but they had heard about it. So they would ask people where they could stop, and that sort of thing and, you know, we tried to make that very long trip in, you know, 18-hour trip almost -- and my father was the only driver. So he— we would have to stop so he could rest, you know. We would stop and pull over in a rest area, rather

than go to try to get into a hotel or motel -- we never did any of that. So that remains with me. But, you know, back to the Crown Heights area, I think that's why my mother and father were so -- were comfortable enough. My father integrated Manhattan College, my mother had gone into integrated schools when she was a child -- not to the extent that we did -- so they felt comfortable dealing with the White folks in Crown Heights and bringing up their kids there. And plus, as my parents said, wherever their kids are going to school, that's going to be the best quality school -- that's where you're going, you know. And if we have to pay for school, we'll pay for school. So, it was all about upward mobility, and putting up -- you know, dealing with racism for -- to get the privileges, a part of the privileges that White folks were getting by just, by just existing. So that, they explained their motivation to us, because we said, "Why are we here?" You know? [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: What were their thoughts about your interest in becoming a civil rights supporter?

SIMMONS: Well, my parents knew I was going to be a nurse, or a social worker, or something -- I was always helping people. I had been an orator and debater since I was in, since I was in grammar school. But, you know, because they knew my personality and I am the helper type, they were sure that, you know, I was going to be -- I even got a nursing scholarship, and my father was very, very upset with me when I wouldn't go to nursing school at Cornell. Well, I said, I can't even stand the sight of blood -- I can't take that. I don't want to be a nurse; I don't want to be around any of that. But, they knew I had every intention. I went to Hunter because they had the best education department of CUNY, and I wanted to be a teacher. I loved teaching, but it became quite apparent to me that I wasn't -- this was all in time with the teachers' strike and everything else -- by then, I was very political. I said, "I can't go into public schools. I wouldn't last there for a year. So I'm going to have to find, you know, a private school or whatever, to teach in." And, one of my mentors -- and you're looking at one of him -- John Henry Clark was one of my mentors. We brought him to teach at -- when I say "we," I mean the students hired the faculty -- and we brought him to teach at Hunter.

So he was one of my mentors, and Tilden LeMelle, who's the college president now at Marymount -- he probably retired by now. Both of them took me to the side -- they were my, they were my advisors -- took me to the side, and we said, "I think that you need--" First they tried to get me to go to Yale, because Yale was starting a female -- opening up to -- and they were looking for Black-- but I said, "First of all, I have a son. My family's here. I'm not going to integrate another school." I told them that, "This is the last one." Of course, it wasn't -- law school was more. But I said, I said, "No, I'm not going -- no, I've done that. No." "You'd be great." I said, "I know. I'm not doing it." They said, "You're one of the best students we have, you would--" "I know, but I'm not doing it. I'm staying right here, and besides the fact that I have all my activities, and you know, I want to continue the work that I'm doing with the Black Student Union, and student government, and everything else, and this is where I'm going to stay. And I have an interest -- I am a student rep on the P & B" -- you know, the Personnel and Budget for the department -- "and I want to make sure that this department gets off to a good start. So, they were the ones that pulled me aside and said, "We think you need to think about law school." They said, "You have --" I represented a Black Student Union, the childcare center that we started as a student cooperative, I was the one that would go and make the petitions for -- write everything up for funding, and everything, and they said, "You are a lawyer in the making. You have been doing this advocacy work. We think you would make a really good lawyer." And I said, "Well, I don't know -- I don't know anything about lawyering. I don't know any lawyers." They said, "Well, just do a little investigation into it. We'll have you meet with a couple," like Constance Baker Motley -- you know, I went to meet with her, and talked to her, and she said, "Yeah, you're the, yeah, you're an activist. You came -- you have the same upbringing. I went through the" -- I'm sorry -- "the Freedom, the Freedom Rides. Your— this is your version of the Freedom Rides. Yeah, you would make a good advocate, but you've got to keep your grades up," because you know, they slipped a little with all the activism. She said, "Bring your grades back up," which is the reason I took that year to make sure that I— everything that needed to be done for my college was done correctly, so my

transcript would look the way it was supposed to look. And she said, and she said, "What makes you interested in all of this?" And I just said, "Well, you know, I integrated--" "Oh, you're another integration baby?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah." She said, "OK, well, you don't have to explain that to me, I understand that. There's a lot of us rolling around here doing this work, because we know what it really means, you know, personally -- what it, what it took for you to steel yourself and walk --" I may not have had to walk past people -- throngs, you know with, with the -- Sometimes I wish I had the National Guard next to me, because the police department certainly wasn't interested in any of this -- I'm talking about the local precinct, the same 71 precinct that my mother worked out of, you know -- they were not really interested in any of this, and they probably would have done something for us, after she became a crossing guard and auxiliary police, because we were her children. But by then, I was like, "I've had enough." So, that's what motivated me to do it, and once I started looking into it, I said, "Yeah, this is something I can do," and I just sat for the LSAT, I didn't take the prep course -- big mistake. I found out afterwards -- I was devastated, because my scores were always high, high, high, and it was a mediocre score for me -- it was like the bottom edge of good, you know? And then I found out everybody took a prep course, but of course, I'm a struggling student, I'm not thinking about laying down what was then probably $300 for a prep course. I didn't even read the book; I just sat for the test. It didn't matter -- I got a couple of offers, and I went to the one that was most convenient for childcare, which was Brooklyn Law School. My mother said that she would stay home and do— be my childcare person, and I was very grateful to that for her, and she did that for me for, like three years, three years. So, I went to Brooklyn Law School, and spent most of my days -- my nights -- on Sterling Street, rather than going back to Queens, where I was living. I spent most of my weekdays on Sterling Street; with -- my children were there, we slept over, and on weekends we went home, like the country home, you know? But it wasn't quite the country, you know, it was a desert. And my husband was in school and working, and so it was working out for all of us, you know? Not ideal for everybody being in the same place at the same time, but

it was working out for all of us. And during law school, I remained a student activist, and I headed up the Black Law Students Association, and got us involved in some of the local things that were going on at the time, and I knew that I wanted to do this type of work when I got out. I really thought of being a government lawyer, so that's initially what I did, and clerked for a judge, and worked for the city, the state, and the federal government, and did a lot of political work. Because remember I told you, when I grew up, all the politicians, all the elected officials were White -- even as the neighborhood became Black, everybody was White. So I worked as a volunteer attorney and head of -- I should say, co-leader of the legal committee for the Coalition for Community Empowerment, which was basically the political organization; a coalition political organization for Crown Heights and all of what was called Central Brooklyn -- Brownsville, Fort Greene, East New York, Flatbush -- and Flatbush was just turning at that point. A group of folks that came together to get Black and Latino folks -- even in Bushwick -- elected, quality candidates elected to public office, and I did that work for ten years. And, basically, every initial Black elected official in this area— other than Sam Wright and Waldaba Stewart, who were over in East New York/Brownsville, probably all of the folks that came after— I served as their attorney; election law attorney, and we basically, quote, "liberated" those communities to be elected by, to be represented by people of color, or whoever people; our people chose. Because we chose Marty Markowitz, and he wasn't a person of color. I wasn't his legal representative, but that's who the community chose, and that's who you had to respect. So, I did that work, and political, electoral political work for dozens -- at least, dozens -- at least two dozen years, freely as a volunteer. When I left -- when I left working for the federal Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, the next job I had was working for the Attorney General's office, and from there, I was appointed by Daddy Cuomo -- [laughter] yeah -- Mario Cuomo, to be the first Deputy Commissioner of Human Rights for the State of New York. I was one of the youngest commissioners in the state, but I had all the civil rights work experience and had already worked for the city and the state doing civil rights work, so, and all of this volunteer civil rights work.

A colleague of mine took a case all the way to the Supreme Court under the Voting Rights Act, as a volunteer attorney. So I had a wealth of experience doing civil rights work, so I served under the Cuomo administration for approximately two and a half years, and then I got the opportunity to be the founding director of the Center for Law and Social Justice, which I was happy to say I was one of the attorneys that brought it into being. I wasn't the only one, it wasn't my idea originally, but this was my dream job. What I planned to do: Start a community organization that did civil rights work, on the ground level, and when some other attorneys brought their idea to me, I helped shepherd it -- rewrote it and helped shepherd it through legislature, and it was funded, and then I applied for the position, I got the position, and I've been here ever since. That's 31 years ago.

OKECHUKWU: So, before we get to the emergence of the Center for Law and Social Justice, can you speak a little bit about, I guess, the '70s and the early '80s, like the kind of political conditions that would have led to something like the founding of the center? Like, what were -- particularly in Crown Heights, what was the community concerned with? Why did the community center -- why would a center for law and social justice need to exist?

SIMMONS: OK, so this was really -- the Center for Law and Social Justice came to be in Crown Heights because Medgar Evers College is in Crown Heights, and it was, at that time, the only predominantly Black college out of the CUNY system. And when the founders of the center were looking for a place for it to be located, Medgar Evers was obvious, and we also have an affiliation with the CUNY law school, which was brand new at the time. OK, so that's how it wound up being here, but basically, it arose out of the long history of police killings. So, Michael Stewart -- I can't even bring all these names up to you at this point. Michael Stewart killing -- he was someone that was killed in— by the transit police for graffiti.

OKECHUKWU: Arthur Miller?

SIMMONS: Oh, thank you. Arthur Miller -- I did work with the Black United Front, which was handling activism around practically all of these police killings, and all racial

violence killings. Yusef Hawkins -- that was a young man that went to buy a car in Bensonhurst that was killed because he was in the neighborhood, and they thought he was going to see a White girl. I'm sorry, I'm not good -- you might be better at the names than I am at this point.

OKECHUKWU: That's OK, we don't need all the names.

SIMMONS: Yeah. There was a 14 year old--

OKECHUKWU: The one that was beat up?

SIMMONS: That was killed by -- yeah, 14 year old killed in this area.

OKECHUKWU: So, Michael Griffith -- but that's Howard Beach. Michael Griffith was from Weeksville Gardens, [inaudible]--

SIMMONS: Exactly, Michael Griffith was from here -- right, Michael Griffith. And, all these were going on, and myself and several activist attorneys were doing what we could to assist the victims, and we realized we needed to have an institutional base, to not just deal with police racial violence, but voting rights, education -- and so we wanted to create this center, and the center was very instrumental in responding to police and racial violence. I would say we were the— one of the— primary voices out of the Black community for about ten years, and then other folks started getting more involved, and the Black United Front sort of eased down in terms of activism, and so we continued to do other work, like we started doing immigration work, and we weren't as active in the police brutality issue. But, that was only after we helped civilianize the CCRB. I worked with a group of activists and attorneys to rewrite the CCRB mandate, and under David Dinkins as mayor, and to remove all police personnel from operating the CCRB. Because before that, it was called Civilian Complaint Review Board, but all the staffers were police; civilian police people, or former police people, and that's how they kept the violations from coming, becoming -- going on police officers' record. And of course, there were some that still got on there, because they were so atrocious. But there was no -- the CCRB was weak, because it could not -- it could only make recommendations to the police department. So, we changed that to make sure that the recommendations had to be reviewed by the police department, after we changed it to

be all civilian. But later, afterward -- and I wasn't involved in this -- there was recently a change to make it be able to adjudicate its own cases, and basically hold police officers responsible, rather than shifting everything over to NYPD Internal Affairs, and maybe they did something and maybe they didn't. And a lot of times, they didn't. And a lot of times, they just kept going on like nothing had happened, even after there was a violation found by the CCRB. So, I was very proud of that work; that we did that work. We did -- the center did a lot of work around education reform, and during that period of time, I sat on both the first Districting Commission of the City of New York, and also on the Board of Education. I was still working full-time here, and those were volunteer jobs. I was doing both that, and then, we had some -- we had a tremendous staff that came through here -- we're very small now, but we've had as many as 30 employees in the past. So -- but that's OK, organizations like this ebb and flow. If you don't ebb and flow, you just go out of business, you know. So that's all right -- and we're actually growing a little bit right now. So, you have to know how to do the work without having -- being top-heavy with staff. So, I mean, everybody does everything here, and that includes filing -- you know, everything, everything. We have a new staff member, and she came on just this weekend, and she is a researcher, and she -- her first thing was to reorganize the files. [laughter] I said, "OK, I mean, if they said that's what they needed you to do." And I spent half of this week getting out the end-of-year donor request letter, you know but— And, of course, at the same time, I'm writing up a legal paper, and I'm going to meetings with elected officials about possible bills that they can present, so you're doing it all. So, the, the -- around the killing of Rudolph Evans -- Rudolph Evans was a young guy that was killed by a group of cars driving through Crown Heights that was the Rebbe's entourage, and this young boy -- he was like only eight or something-something years old, like that -- was killed by one of the cars in the entourage, and he was just left there. After the car hit them, they didn't stop, they just --

OKECHUKWU: This was before Gavin Cato?

SIMMONS: Oh, that is Gavin Cato. This is Gavin Cato. That is Gavin Cato. That's Gavin Cato. So, of course we got involved in that, and it was -- right after that, there was an

uprising in Crown Heights, because of the horrific treatment that was given to this young man, and the fact that the police department didn't want to charge anybody in his death. And because the Rebbe was involved, they were like doing hands off -- in fact, the person that actually had his vehicle kill him was visiting from another part of the world, he wasn't even living -- wasn't even a regular resident of Crown Heights. But they have scholars coming from all over the world to study at their headquarters, so that's not an unusual occurrence. But the fact that they didn't want any charges brought, and that the police did not service this young man, was the atrocity. So of course, we were very deeply involved in that. There were tons and tons of "Bring Crown Heights together" meetings, and stuff like that, and we did some rather hard-hitting policy statements about what the real problem was with the Crown Heights --

OKECHUKWU: What was the real problem?

SIMMONS: The real problem was that the police didn't want to serve the Black community, and when it was obviously that this was going to be the Black community against the Jewish community, they were siding with the Jewish community -- and not siding with, they were just basically ignoring the Black community, and people were outraged. And the people who became outraged were the new residents of Caribbean -- of Crown Heights, and that is the Caribbean immigrants. They were not used to this type of neglect. They were outraged that this young person had been left on the side of the street, and that the police did not bring an ambulance to him and that the, and that the Jewish ambulance that was there did not pick him up and bring him to a hospital. I mean, it was like subhuman treatment given to this young person, and of course, he died. His mother was in awe that this could happen. So we wrote up an article about how -- did our own investigation about how the police department was the one -- if they had only acted in the interests of all of the Crown Heights residents, they could have stopped the outrage. They would have taken a normal accident thing, called the ambulance, taken the guy into custody, or put him under arrest, or given him a summons, or something, instead of acting like nothing had happened. Now, this came on the heels of the fact that there had become, in Crown Heights, this group of

vigilantes, that— of Hasidic Jews— that were supposedly patrolling the Crown Heights area, and they were regularly beating up Black people, for being on their blocks, and stuff like that. [unintelligible] shades of Crown Heights -- here we are again, OK? And the people that they would sometimes be beating up were people who lived on that block. Because they declared it to be one of their blocks, and they had some folks that were known to be, quote, "out of control," that were members of this vigilante group, who had been reported to police several times, and, you know, never arrested, and this was basically the boiling point. The new residents of Crown Heights -- and that's basically Caribbean immigrants just -- and remember, Cato was also -- his mother was an immigrant, was— Like, they just went bonkers, and went up against the police department, "What's going on here?" Now mind you, in Borough Park or something, if a member of that community is arrested or taken into custody, the whole Jewish community comes out and, and wants to know why the police have arrested this person, and the police have to come out and explain, etc. When Black folks did this, it was called a riot, and the whole racial tensions and simmering that went on in Crown Heights, it got very ugly at that point. Because, you know, people wanted an end to the special treatment. They wanted an end to the special police guard. They wanted to be able to walk down Eastern Parkway between Kingston and Brooklyn Avenue that were barricaded off, and they didn't want anybody walking there. You know, they just demanded that, you know, "We want to have police walking our streets as well in Crown Heights." There was, you know, there's this crack epidemic too, you know? Things were happening; negative things were happening in the neighborhood. It wasn't as bad as some other neighborhoods, but all Black neighborhoods were devastated in New York City at that, during that epidemic. So, it was like, you know, what is going on here, and why can't this be seen as a rebellion? Because that's exactly what it was. And, why are we getting a deaf ear here? Why are we receiving a deaf ear, and why wasn't that young person attended to? You know, and it reminds you so much of what you saw that happened in -- oh God -- Flint. What happened in Flint, when the young man— when the man was just left on the side of the road for two hours, you

know, after a police shot him.

OKECHUKWU: [inaudible] Ferguson.

SIMMONS: Ferguson, I'm sorry. Ferguson, Michigan, right, not Flint, Ferguson, Michigan. And people wanted -- It's the same question; why are we being, why are we being treated as subhuman? This is, by the way, the same level of ethnic -- I shouldn't say ethnic, it's not ethnic -- racial conflict that I got tired of dealing with living in Crown Heights. You know, you want to go home and be at peace. You don't want to go home, and as soon as you walk out the door, there's more evidence of conflict. And while some of this has died down a bit, as the Lubavitch community continues to expand, I think you're going to see some more of this. And it's never returned to the height of favoritism that it was in the 71st precinct in the years, in the late '60s and '70s and '80s. That was ridiculous, what was going on there.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak more of those -- could you speak a little bit about the types of -- like, the police would service their areas but not the Black areas -- Could you speak more about other types of, I guess, preferential treatment, or what folks were perceiving as unequal between --?

SIMMONS: Yes. It is -- it's A to Z. And so, let's talk now about the two -- now, now this is interesting. At one point, because of all the tensions, the dividing point sort of became Empire Boulevard, OK, particularly beyond Nostrand Avenue; maybe a little bit east of Nostrand Avenue, but below No-- I'm sorry, below Empire Boulevard and Nostrand Avenue, OK. So that whole area that used to be called Crown Heights South, you would -- outrageous alternate side of the street parking six days a week. Garbage, snow removal -- garbage removal, snow removal; the least amount. The last -- the last in the whole area -- the last servicing. The— No sanitation people sweeping up the streets. The school district was School District 17. The schools on that side of 17 were different from the schools on the south side of Empire Boulevard, in terms of the services and the school -- and the quality. One of the best middle schools in the city was located at that same PS 161 where my mother used to be the crossing guard. They, they have, they put a middle school there -- it was called the Crown School. They would basically

be taking -- the Jewish students did not go -- the Jewish residents did not go to public schools. Let me say a little about that. The community school district board was controlled by Hasidic Jews. There were -- Crown Heights was split into two community boards. There was the one North Crown Heights and South Crown Heights; they did not get the same amount of funding. I'll tell you, you go on and on and on and on. Oh, streets -- streets and streetlights. Streetlights, speed bumps were put in North Crown Heights, and nothing was done for South Crown Heights. There was a -- it took several elected officials -- Jan Atwell [sic] Junior High School, that's what it's called now. This, the— Lefferts Junior High School became the Jan Atwell Junior High School. The same playground, handball court -- that had become completely neglected. It took several Black elected officials to get that playground back up to par. So it wasn't full of, you know, broken bottles, and debris that was dangerous to children and families, so you could actually use the park again. The buildings in some of the Heights, the-- some of the facilities in some of the school buildings were so abominable that, you know, 100-year-old buildings with— that didn't have new heating systems, no air conditioning in the summer. It was, it was pretty abysmal; what was going on. And then -- I already talked about the police, the 71st. There was a— supposed to be— community; South Crown Heights went a little bit further over to that old neighborhood near Wingate, and more services would be sent over there -- still a little White enclave, OK -- that would be sent to the portions that were closest to North Crown Heights, I'll put it like that. So, it was a lot of resentment across the board, just a lot of resentment. On different ticketing -- you know, the police would treat your street different than they would treat, than they would treat the streets in the Jewish area. The crown of Crown Heights -- that is, you'll know where they are, because they have garages in the back of their house, and they have a sanitation lane -- a driving, and their sanitation is picked up behind their house, so they never have to have garbage cans in the front of their house; so that's President Street, that's Carroll Street, that's Crown Street -- I don't think it goes far as Montgomery, but -- and that was the jewel of Crown Heights, OK, and that same old Doctors' Row and everything else.

Those streets; they would get trees from the city. I mean, they would make sure that their trees were pruned, they would get trees planted -- I mean, that little community was actually very well taken care of by the city, and this was when the transitioning was going on. It was extremely well taken care of by the city and city— for city services. And then you would go, you know, three blocks south, and you know, you would be kicking garbage just to cross the street. So, that's— yeah, the cleanliness of the streets, sanitation of the streets. There were— [inaudible] there were foot patrols in North Crown Heights; police patrol, and there were only car patrols in South Crown Heights, and they would only come, they would only patrol -- They would patrol the area, and then they would only come if somebody called the police. So you would see all these police coming in, coming in for an alert. But for everyday occurrences, it wasn't happening and— It was, you know a lot of muggings were taking place, and you know, it went nowhere, because there was no police protection at that area.

OKECHUKWU: When you say North Crown Heights, you're talking about north of Empire, or north of Eastern Parkway?

SIMMONS: North of Empire. North of Empire. Yeah, that was -- South Crown Heights -- Crown Heights goes to Empire; so yeah, Eastern Parkway is like the middle of Crown Heights. That's -- it was -- people would complain to community boards. The community board -- the north community board was controlled by conservative Jews, by, by Hasidic Jews. The office manager was a Hasidic Jew. So it was, you know, it was separate but equal -- unequal. Separate but unequal, and very staunch, very apparent. More apparent in this neighborhood -- in that neighborhood, than any other neighborhood I've ever seen favoritism go on like that. I haven't lived in all over New York City, so I can't really talk about what happens in the Bronx, or Queens, or whatever. But that type of favoritism, I think, I think people sort of agreed at the time that it was pretty bad. There was a play done by Anna Deavere Smith called -- you know about that, OK. And she did a pretty good rendition of the different voices of Crown Heights, and that was right after the rebellion, OK. But until the rebellion, there was very, very little heed given to the discrimination, and the favoritism; one versus

the other, because it was a political way of life in, in Brooklyn, because of the way things were constructed. Things changed quite a bit after redistricting, and elected officials; Black and Latino elected officials started to be elected in— well, not so much Latino here— but in this area, and White representatives became more responsive. The voting population of new immigrant families started to rise, as people became citizens, and Caribbean elected officials, immigrant elected officials were elected, like Una Clarke, that sort of thing, so it -- things did change, and people were looking out for all of the residents. And I will say that since the change, there's been much more equalization. Some people say there's still a lot of favoritism. I don't live there. I really don't know. And working here, I haven't seen as much, because my eyes are very, very tainted from early experiences. So I don't see what I used to see. And when I say a police guard, I mean a police guard, you know; 24/7, I mean at their, at their house of worship, and I don't— I'm not saying that that's a bad thing. But if they're going to do that thing, you know, there's plenty other houses of worship that could use a police guard. You know there are, there are Christian churches, there are mosques, there are other houses of worship that have been broken into, and their, their collections stolen, etc., and that, that didn't occur. So you know, there's, there is no quote, "chosen people" among the citizens of New York City, and certainly among the residents of Crown Heights. So, it still leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I really -- as I said, it was quite an experience; going through all of it, and I wouldn't wish it on anybody else. I really wouldn't. It's not the sort of thing -- you want to be, you want to be a good neighbor. I respect everybody. I believe in religious freedom; I want everyone to practice their own religion, and do it whichever way they want, but not when it harms other people, and that is not the practice of religion. That was pure and unadulterated political favoritism. That's not religion. That's nothing to do with religion. And, I don't know anything -- there were always rumors about how the police captain, and everything, were on the payroll -- I don't know if any of that's true. I really don't know, and to tell -- I hope it's not true, hope it wasn't true. But I'll tell you the truth, they still had an obligation to serve the rest of the community, and not to treat us as the criminals, and

them -- and the Jewish community as the residents. No, we're all residents; we're all New Yorkers, we all wanted service, and not just sanitation service, etc. It sort of— Things sort of evened out a little bit when there was an attempt by the Lubavitch community to stop the West Indian Day Parade from occurring, on Eastern Parkway, and I think at that point, the Black community sort of put our foot down, and said, "No. This is our celebration." They didn't want it going past their -- and even now, there was some -- Even last year, I heard about the fact that there was some barricades put up on the, in the middle of Eastern Parkway that would make it difficult for the floats to pass by, and people didn't realize that when the barricades were requested by the Jewish community, that that would have been the result of them not being able -- I don't know how that was resolved, but I'll tell you one thing, the floats went by; something was done. I don't know what was done, but the parade went on as it usually did. And, so I don't know how that was resolved. But some folks brought that to me, and I said, you know, when -- this has already been passed. I mean, it was already passed the community board and everything. Nobody recognized this until the last -- I said, "You're going to have to find a way to resolve this through the department, the police department, and sanitation, to resolve it so that the floats and everything could get past, because you're not going to get a l--" because they're asking me about a lawsuit -- "You're not going to get a lawsuit after this went through land use and everything else." I mean there was, there was a period for this to happen. Sometimes you can't do things at the last minute, you can't. You have to stay -- and I'll say this to everybody -- you have to stay constantly vigilant, and that's -- you see that? Even last year, somebody's coming to me about what's happening in Crown Heights, and you know what I'm saying to myself? I don't live there anymore. I'm not saying we can't service people. Of course we're going to service people from Crown Heights; we're in Crown Heights. But that kind of everyday public warfare? It's like, why can't we all get along, right? You have your thing, we have ours, we're trying to -- you know, nobody disrespects your stuff. But, you know, why can't it be a share? And it does— never seems to ever want to work out that way, and it's still continuing to this day. And I

really don't know what happened with the, with the floats, but I could put you in touch with someone who might be very happy to talk to you; he's a senior like I am now, but he's actually a little older than me. So I'm going to have to get his name out of my head, and then his phone number, but he would be a good person, because he was chief of staff to Shirley Chisholm.

OKECHUKWU: [inaudible]

SIMMONS: OK, yeah, I think he'd be very happy to talk to you.

OKECHUKWU: What was the Black United Front, and what was their relationship to the Center for Law and Social Justice?

SIMMONS: The Black United Front was a community organization -- it was actually a national organization -- that was started by Jitu Weusi, Reverend Herbert Daughtry, and some other activist after the killing of Arthur Miller, who was a businessman; he was killed by the police, and for just being Black and a male, you know? And they presumed that he was up to no good; he was, you know, doing nothing. And he was shot and killed, and nothing happened. The police officer was not convicted. I think that, I think that was the case where they came up with the temporary epileptic fit defense; it was really wild. You'll have to look that one up; Arthur Miller. They stayed very active in the Downtown Brooklyn community, and they set up a fund for local businesses— like A&S, etc.— which was called the Randolph Evans fund, named after the young man that was killed, where they gave out scholarships. I don't think they still do that, but it was a good thing. But the Black United Fund [sic] would basically— had an organized crew of people, including attorneys, so that when these killings occurred they would be able to call people into gear. They had somebody by the name of David Walker, who was an investigator, like a private investigator, who would go out and investigate these police killings, and he was on the original staff of the center, and he would do investigations for us on police killings. And, our lawyers would also respond to the police killings, so we were working side by side with them. The victims would need attorneys, and we would recommend folks who were familiar with this to handle their cases; civil and sometimes criminal, because sometimes family members,

or even the victim, was charged with a criminal -- yeah, to sort of deter them from doing anything, and they would, they would call us when something happened, or sometimes we would call them, and we kept the pressure on. We met with the police, obviously, with the NYPD on a regular basis about handling, the handling of these cases, and we wouldn't let the cases die down until they were adjudicated. So we went to the U.S.-- If we had to, we went to the U.S. Attorney's office, the federal government, to try to get the cases filed. Sometimes we were successful there, sometimes we weren't. But it was a whole cadre of folks working on this. That was, that was before the good old days that are still existing, when the federal government will now come out without your calling them to come out. It's really— you know, Eric Holder and them, they really got a— It's such a change, when they— We would bring them out, dragging, kicking, and screaming; we would bring them into these cases, and sometimes they would take them and sometimes they wouldn't. The Black United Front, as I say, it was a nonprofit -- I don't know if it was a 501c(3), or anything like that, but it was -- a lot of community leaders were on it; Sam Pinn, who was the head of Fort Greene Senior Citizens Center, he was one of the leaders on it. These folks are all seniors; they're my seniors now. Al Vann was active in it. And, they did such good work in New York that they started chapters in other parts of the city -- other parts of the country, so there was Chicago, etc. I wasn't a member of the Black United Front, I just did a lot of work with them. And, I will say that they -- Reverend Daughtry was the lead figure for the Black United Front, so he was the one that would be meeting with the mayors and the governors, etc., and he's written his own autobiographies, so you could read that, about -- and he has a church located on -- House of the Lord; located on Atlantic Avenue in the Downtown Brooklyn area, that's not in Crown Heights. But in Crown Heights— while he was not an activist man, activist reverend— one of the most influential reverends, ministers in the city was Reverend Clarence Norman, right here on First Baptist Church of Crown Heights. He was a power broker even before his son went to the, went to the State Assembly, and I knew his son from BALSA [laughter]; I knew his son from the Black American Law Students Association. He was a rep from

St. Johns, and I was in charge of the metropolitan area, and I was a rep from Brooklyn Law. So we knew each other well before we even became attorneys, and while I didn't work on his campaign or help him get elected, we did a lot of policy work together, and as he said, I was always the idealist, and he was the pragmatist. As this is our -- these were our terms for each other, and this is way before he became county leader, or whatever. Way before he— Charles Hynes went after him, and you know, he was in prison. I'm still, I'm still in shock over that, because what he went to prison for was— to me— quite ridiculous, and every county leader before him and after -- I shouldn't say after -- every county leader before him had always leaned on people to hire folks to do outreach in the Black community, and the fact that that had become a crime -- he got no money out of it.

OKECHUKWU: Why do you think he [inaudible]?

SIMMONS: Because he didn't, he didn't support the reelection of the District Attorney, being Charles Hynes. He was supporting someone running against him, a Black person, and that was enough for Charles Hynes to go, go after him. But [laughter] I mean, all the ethics rules have now changed. So now that is not something that somebody can do. But then, you know, telling somebody that, "Yes, you need to hire somebody to work the Black community." I'm sorry, but I'm not offended by that; [laughter] particularly since these were county-wide races we're talking about, and the people who were running had no connection with the Black community whatsoever, and yes, they had to pay these people to do that work. But, you know they're paying people who do work in other communities. So you know, I found it a little offensive that this was criminalized, particularly since he got nothing out of it; he got no money whatsoever, nothing came to his pocket, there was no graft going on, so you know. But he was, and he served time, and then he had to step down from public office, and that's really what they wanted, was to break the back of the huge political base that had come up in Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights -- he was Crown Heights. That was Crown Heights as— in Black political glory, OK? And the person he took over from, Woody Lewis, was an old-time -- good elected official, by the way, good -- and this was, he was a Black elected

official in the Assembly before there were other Black elected officials. So he was a really good Black elected official. We're going way, way back to when the first Black elected officials— when Crown Heights had a Black elected official. He was amongst the first, I should put it like that, and that only started around the '50s and the '60s. So Woody Lewis; Woodrow Lewis was excellent, and he took that, that spot. And, he was a very good elected -- he was very good for this area, did a lot of good work -- housing, senior citizens centers, etc. We don't see that coming in here at that, at the rate now. But now we have new elected officials, and we have great hopes for Diana Richardson, and you know. Freddie Hamilton has now thrown his— tied in with the Republicans, so I don't know what's going to happen with that State Senator. But you know, we have Black elected officials that I see, so far, committed to this community. But, they're green, so we're going to have to see what they can really do. Laurie Cumbo also covers part -- covers Crown Heights, and she's been very effective.

OKECHUKWU: In the '80s, there was a lot of, like, rent strikes, and housing issues in Crown Heights. Did the Center for Law and Social Justice connect or interface with any housing issues?

SIMMONS: No, we weren't involved in any of that, except when -- interesting -- the Lizard of Crown Heights, his building was one block from my family's house on Sterling Street, and that's the building he went to jail for. We didn't do housing -- we have never done housing work -- but what we do do is free legal consultation, which means that we did housing work. But the free legal consultation meant that we were hooking people up with the activist tenants groups, and helping the tenants groups that came to us to get hooked up with tenants -- you know, citywide tenants' organizations that would get them on a good footing, because we didn't need to reinvent the wheel. This was already in occurrence. There were good citywide groups, so we don't -- believe me, with our resources, we try to do what we do best, and refer people to folks who are already doing the work. So yeah, I was very happy to refer people who were living in the Lizard's building when that rent strike was going on, and there were several in the Crown Heights area going on, and we were supporting those rent strikes, and the

people would come to us, and of course, the thing we had to keep telling them was, "Put your rent in escrow, put your rent in escrow, put your rent in escrow." Because the rent strikes were going on because it was pre-gentrification. They were trying to flip those buildings. Some of them wanted to sell them to the Lubavitch, this— the buildings we're talking about were right there on the cusp of where the Lubavitch were, and where they wanted to be. So if they could get people out of those buildings, they could have sold the building, and, entire groups of families could move into those buildings. So this was going on, but there was a rent strike right down here on Eastern Parkway on one, in one of those glorious buildings -- 225 I think it is. They had to, they had to have a rent strike because they were doing the same thing there, and yes, we had to refer tenants to the police departments; not just the 7-1, but, what's the other one?

OKECHUKWU: Seven-seven?

SIMMONS: The 7-7 -- thank you -- the 7-7, because of the goons. And I'm saying that word exact-- they were -- two things. While the Bronx was burning, Crown Heights was going through what I call the hired goon syndrome, where they would -- no heat, no hot water, and then they would hire these hoodlums to come and hang out at your, at the building, and go into your apartment; break into your apartment, destroy apartments, beat tenants up, you know, threaten tenants -- this was going -- It was widespread, widespread, and these were landlords who were hiring these folks to get people out of these apartments. Some of the apartment buildings, they wanted to coop -- this was when the conversion was going on. The conversion was going -- in the height of conversions was 1980 to 1990, when they-- old apartment buildings were being converted into coops, and they wanted-- Some of these apartment buildings wanted to get tenants out, because tenants had— tenants there had a right of first refusal to the coops, and that would break their deal. So, there was horrible things going on in Crown Heights, and I hate to say it, but that has come back again. So, we have people that have formed— the Crown Heights Tenants Union— that are fabulous. One of the leaders works right here at Medgar Evers in, on this floor. I hope you've met her, Donna Mossman--

OKECHUKWU: I know her, but I haven't met her yet [inaudible] and interview her.

SIMMONS: Oh, I'm going to walk you out -- I'm going to walk you out of here so you can meet Donna Mossman, who was nothing but a tenant herself and has become a tenants rights dynamo; fabulous person, and she's been working at the college off and on for quite a while, and now she's been here, and we're very happy to have her back. But she does this in her spare time; this is her volunteer work. She doesn't do this for a living. She works for one of the youth programs that we have here. I should mention that Medgar Evers has one of the largest youth programs in Brooklyn. We serve over 4,000 youths, and most of our youth programs -- I'd say at least half of them are located in the Crown Heights area, and we've been serving the Crown Heights area. We have, like, two beacon schools here; one beacon school in South-- what was formerly, in Prospect Lefferts Gardens now -- no. Two beacon schools over there, and we're also serving the Albany projects, and seven house— several housing projects and their community centers; we're running the community centers for them, and putting programming in. So, it's -- Medgar Evers is very deeply involved in that. We take our role, as the Center for Law and Social Justice -- we are here deliberately. We chose to be here. I could have moved the center out of Medgar Evers; we had offers to go into Manhattan, to go, you know, Downtown Brooklyn and I said, "We're not going anywhere. We're going to stay right here, right at Medgar Evers College, right in Crown Heights." At one point, we were on Fulton Street, in Bed-Stuy, but we moved back to the college in the '90s; we were on Fulton Street in Bed-Stuy for about five, six years, we were renting a storefront there, and then we moved back to the college, and we've been here from the beginning and now, again, and we're happy to be here. We're going to stay in Central Brooklyn, and we're not moving out of this area, because this is where our constituents are, and this is the population we want to serve, and we want them to know that there is, there is a law center that's looking at the big picture. Not just individual legal services cases -- and we do have legal services in this area. But we're not a legal services office; we're a racial justice, public policy, and litigation center, looking at big-impact situations that are facing our community.

OKECHUKWU: How does the Center for Law and Social Justice engage students, since it's at a college?

SIMMONS: Well, we have— We usually have two or three -- and we have three now -- students that are interns, or sometimes work-study. Four students, we actually have now. We also have a high school student. We have law students that come in from CUNY Law, and from other law schools. We'll be having some in the spring, and we're open to even more college students, and high school students, but they do have to apply, and go through our screening process. Because we need students that can write well, we need students that can do, you know, simple research. While there is some phone answering and some xeroxing, there's a lot of other work. So when I need someone to look up, you know, "Who was Hattie Carthan?" I want them to be able to tell me in less than an hour who it was, and if they need to write up a two-page document, to be able to write it up, because I'm going to need to work with that within the next day or two, you know? So, it's an exciting experience; when we go to court, we bring the students with us, so they sit in the audience and they see what we're doing. We don't go to court that often, and a lot of our cases are not court cases. They're basically settled almost as soon as we bring them. So it's much more negotiating with the city, or the government, or a wrongdoer; like, we had a case against Con Edison that went on for like five, six years. We didn't bring the students to Con Edison's offices, but we did bring the students to the final court hearing on that. And so it's, it's exciting for us to work with students, we want to work with students. Most of the students that come to us are interested in law, and some part— Some of them think law is what television tells them, and they're quite— come in [Interview interrupted.]— were quite interested, when they get to see that lawyers do all this mundane sitting at the desk, writing, researching. "You mean, you're not going out--" "No, this is what I'm doing; this is my work today, and yes, I also have to do reports for the college, and--" You know, I said -- and they said -- I said, "No, there's no big fancy car, and -- no, none of that -- that's not real. This is what lawyers do. And yes, some lawyers make more money than others, and I make a decent salary, but I'm not making any big bucks.

Maybe compared to what you think salaries are, maybe I am making big bucks compared to that, but I'm not making what some of my colleagues are that I went to law school with, but I am very happy. I'm very happy doing what I'm doing." The students are very proud of what we're doing. I have to say, though, students are students, so every year, we have to tell students that we're here, and let them know that this center is here, and that they can get free legal consultation. I will say one thing; the students today have a thousand more problems than the students did when I went to school. I mean, everything from homelessness, to domestic violence, to criminal cases, house -- you know, landlord-tenant, I mean, discrimination at the job, I mean -- you know, not getting their paycheck at the job, wage theft -- or being treated like they're subhuman at the job, like not even getting a schedule, they're flipping them back and forth. So, we do a lot of legal work here, from people who come in and we're open to the public as well, so anybody that knows about us— and we do let the public officials know that they can send -- and believe me, they do -- can send people over to us if they have a legal problem, and we'll give them a free legal consultation, and a referral. Sometimes after the consultation, people realize that they don't have, they don't have the lawsuit of their dreams, or sometimes they realize that they've got to get on it right, very quickly, and we give them referrals to ethical people who are not going to rip them off, or legal services, or legal aid, if they qualify.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak a little bit about, like, Black cultural life as it relates to Crown Heights, but also Central Brooklyn? So, we haven't talked about The East, International African Street Festival, or any of that stuff, so, yeah, Black culture.

SIMMONS: OK. Yeah, thank you so much for mentioning that. I consider my -- although I wasn't member of The East, I consider myself a child of The East. I was a regular attendee at their, at their forums and their jazz offerings and their street festivals. The school where I taught at was an offshoot of Uhuru Sasa Shule. The teachers that, the teachers that started— It was a teacher at Uhuru Sasa, and she wanted to start her own thing. So that's how she started up. I regularly worked with Jitu Weusi, and Lumumba Bendeli, and -- and, several of the original staff people that worked here were East

members. So, The East -- what was The East? And, I'm not going to get when The East started -- I don't even know when The East started. I would say roughly -- let me see -- right after Ocean Hill-Brownsville. So I would say that that was '70; 1970, or '69, '70?

OKECHUKWU: I heard '69.

SIMMONS: Sixty-nine, '70, right. Ocean Hill-Brownsville was '67, '68. Yeah -- no, Ocean Hill-Brownville, '68-'69. Right, I was already in college, because I came out to one of the Freedom Schools, you know, to teach as a substitute when they were doing -- during the teachers' strike. Could I use your pencil for a minute, please? I just remembered something.

OKECHUKWU: Do you need a piece of paper?

SIMMONS: Yes, please. [Interview interrupted.] OK, thank you. So, The East was founded after the school -- Uhuru Sasa was founded as an alternative school by Jitu Weusi, then known as Les Campbell, then known as Big Black, and then he changed his name to the Kiswahili translation of Big Black, which is Jitu Weusi, OK -- big; Jitu, Weusi; black. Uhuru Sasa school was started as an alternative school, and many teachers— and he was a public school teacher— so many teachers that were with the African-American Teachers Association, or just teachers in a public school, came to teach at Uhuru Sasa, because they wanted to teach in an African-centered learning environment that was very politically conscious. After The East was started -- I'm sorry, after Uhuru Sasa was started, they then created a cultural arts organization called The East, referring to -- The East as referring to east -- the fact that we were looking to the east, and we were looking to Africa, and the east, and it was a cultural organization and a political organization. So during the time of its high heyday, they had everything. They had, they were [unintelligible] farmers market; a precursor of a farmers market, direct with, directly with Black farmers from the South and the North and the East and the West -- you know, potato farmers and everything. We had folks coming in there; they had the music on the weekends, they had a bookstore, newspaper. I'm leaving something out, seriously. I'll get back to that. And, the school where my children went to, Weusi Shule (Black school) was also led by a former teacher at Uhuru Sasa. So what Uhuru -- So

what The East was doing; The East became a very politically active group for Black nationalists. They were the first ones to bring Kwanzaa to the New York City area, and welcomed Ron Karenga, and instituted living in accordance with the Nguzo Saba; as a way of life and not just as the principles of Kwanzaa. They adopted some of his philosophy, which was Kawaida; which is that you retain the best parts of African culture, and those that are not, that did not serve us, we will not retain, we will discard. So there was a, a renaissance of African-centeredness; with people wearing African clothing, people took African names, there were martial arts class, there were Kiswahili classes, there was spirituality classes. I took some of my judo classes at The East, with Brother Walter Bowe, who was a legend for teaching self-defense and martial arts, and basically got my community, social grounding -- the second half of my social grounding -- while I was a college student, this was all going on. So I would -- my husband, myself, and my children, we would be down there on the weekends; listening to Roy Ayers and, you know, Pharaoh Sanders and all these greats, and— What's the guy? I can't remember his name-- with his Arkestra. And, basically, learning more and more about our culture and our heritage. I was a Black Studies major in school, so this was just right along -- par for the course. My husband and I were pretty independent thinking, so even though we were asked if we wanted to join The East as a family, we decided not to, because they lived communally, and we really already had a house. We already had our household, and I told you, I was going back and forth to Queens. Enough is enough, all right? And plus, with all of its good things, there was still quite a bit of chauvinism; male chauvinism, in the organization, and I was not having it. I'm a feminist; I just was not having it. So, no, no one's going to tell me how, what I'm doing, and how I'm doing it, you know. My husband was very supportive of me as a -- one for women's rights, and I wasn't going to go into an organization where they felt that they could tell me, you know, how I could behave, and what I could do and what I couldn't do. You know, I was already wearing— a, no— African-centered clothing; either in jeans or long skirts. You know, we weren't members of the Nation of Islam. I felt that modesty was a good idea, so I, you know, I put my miniskirts away, and moved into

jeans and long skirts, OK? Mostly jeans, I might say. I'm going, I'm schlepping back and forth to Queens, I'm not running around. Except, of course, when I was making presentations, then I'd whip out one of my skirts, and people would say, "Oh my God -- she has legs!" [laughter] "Or at least we think she has legs." So, so the East was not, was not active in electoral politics. When Al Vann, who was not a member of The East, but a East, a friend of The East, because he was very close with Jitu Weusi. When he first ran for state district leader, state committee man, that was nothing. That was not something that The East became involved in. However, they did later come out and— in later years— come out and support his candidacy for various offices, and Jitu Weusi actually ran for office at one point as well, although he was not successful, he was— But he did have a very good, politically active organization. They hosted the ANC, and various liberation movements from the continent, and Caribbean, and South America -- Cubans would come and go. It was, it was a source of tremendous, tremendous influence in terms of politics; Black politics, particularly pan-Africanist politics, which is what I consider myself to be -- politics in the U.S. And, sent delegations over to various points, parts of the, of the world. They actually started a farm in Guyana, and several people went to Guyana for several years to try and start a farm there, but most of them wound up coming back to the states. These are all East members. But, East members that were original; that were staff members at the Center for Law and Social Justice include Martha Bright, Joan Robinson— now Johnson— Oseye Mchawi, and I know I'm forgetting somebody. But, these were folks that were all members of The East sisterhood, and the bookstore -- Medgar Evers' bookstore was also run by -- by an East member that ran Black Youth for Social Justice -- Joe Mashariki. Joe Mashariki was running the book store, and the Black Veterans organization— which later became a nonprofit, a very successful nonprofit— and he also was running the Medgar Evers bookstore. So there were a lot of East people here; Khadijah Bandele, Sophia Bandele— who was a member of The East— was the originator of the women's center at Medgar Evers College. So there was lots of us filtering around, trying to continue to work. So, the influence -- I consider this institution to be a child of The East. We are definitely --

they preach institution building, and I believe in that; I believe that's the only way our community will survive, is if we build institutions, and that's why— One of the institutions that was an offshoot of The East as well was The Muse, The New Muse, which was a Afrocentric museum and / animal center, and it was located right down the street here— from where I'm sitting now— to that grand building which has been renovated on the corner of Lincoln Place and Bedford Avenue, and that was also -- would also have cultural events, very big on poetry and literature. So they had their poetry circle, the writer's guild would meet there. I remember it because before the Brooklyn Children's Museum, or maybe at the same time -- When the Brooklyn Children's Museum was in existence, they also had like a whole plant area, you know, greenhouse area, and they had house animals that could exist, including snakes and lizards and stuff like that, and they had a whole African-American -- I should say, Africana book section, so -- rare book section, I might add. So some of the books that were there later were transferred over to a bookstore, and now that bookstore has -- the owner has died, so I don't know what has happened to some of these antique books. But it was, it was a great institution; it was a nonprofit, and I think it suffered, because I do believe that the leadership of the New Muse— who was basically much more into literature, etc.— was not that much into nonprofit management. So many of our nonprofits suffered because we were all activists and we weren't managers. You know, we weren't executive directors. We took that title in order to have a title. But we didn't know, you know, file this, file that, do this, do that, and I think it suffered because of that, and I think that's why it later went under, even though they owned the building. So the building was then bought by a Black guy, and he turned it into a catering house; a catering hall, and I don't know -- I know he later became ill, and -- Henry House, it was called, and his name was Henry. A good catering hall, by the way, and then when he became ill, I don't know why it was later sold, but it was sold. So now, I don't know who owns the building, and I don't know if the people— the medical facility that's in it— owns the building. I think they own the building, because of the extensive renovations, but you never know with commercial lease, commercial leases whether it's a lease or

owned, but it is -- it was an institution in the community. You mentioned something else about The East and --

OKECHUKWU: Well, the street -- I mean, that street festival.

SIMMONS: Oh, yeah. Well, the African Street Festival actually started as a fundraiser by the parents association of Uhuru Sasa. So, they wanted -- like most parents, they have fundraisers. So they would have a little festival for their youth, and they had this little festival, and thousands of us showed up -- thousands. So the next year, they closed the street off, and they had a little more, including music, and musicians, you know, and it wasn't just for kiddies. But it was great, because it was African-centered, and the merchants were there, and it was a, you know, a weekend event; it started out as one day, and then it turned into a weekend event, and then they were just busting at the seams, and it really was un— out of control. It was just so long; so many people in that one area. So they tried going down one street, they tried going down another street. But really, they needed to have a big area, and then they moved it from there over to Boys and Girls High which— They would lease the schoolyard and the school for the festival, for the entire Fourth of July weekend, and after the festival was over, they would reseed the grounds, because so many people would come through there. So you had millions of people coming through there, and it grew then from a weekend; from like two days into four days. At one point, it might even have been five days. And stretched out, and top names -- you know, Fela performed there -- I mean, you had all sorts of fabulous performers coming there; free, or, a little nominal contribution. At one point, they started closing it off at night, and then entering with paying $10, or some nonsense -- some ridiculous amount of money -- and it was out in the field. But of course, they'd have rain days, and everything, so that always had been a part of it. If it doesn't rain, you sort of feel like the festival isn't a festival, if you're not tromping through mud at some point. But, it's a -- oh. I forgot another person who was one of the original staff members of the, of the center, who was also an East member, Abimbola Wali, who was one of our— first IT person and executive secretary par excellence. All of these people came to work; I hired them to come here, because I wanted the

commitment, and I knew that they knew what we were trying to do, and they were completely committed to our work. People, we were working -- we would work seven days, late nights -- we had a [laughter] saying that, you know, there are 24 hours in a day, and seven days in a week, and we'll try— we'll get the work done one way or the other, you know? I've later, have later instituted rest periods, where people -- and I strongly urge people to go home to their families at this point, because people do burn out, and you know, while we avoided some of that, I could see it happening with some people, because we really were working late, late hours, you know. All hours, all days of the week, and some of the work was required, and some of the work -- that was just our work habit. Since we moved back to the college, we've become much more, you know, regular work hours; like I'm usually the last one out of here, and I leave around 8:30, late. If I'm leaving late, I'm leaving around 8:30, 9:00. But we still have workshops, and things that end up later than nine o'clock, and yes, I won't say that we don't do a Saturday now and then, because I know I do -- I do it quite often, particularly speaking out in the community. So, yeah -- so, The East festival was an African-centered event, which later became the International African Arts Festival, which better expresses what it was, because it was international from the beginning, and always themed from a different African country, it always had a theme in, in an original African language. They would be bringing in talent from the continent, and all over the diaspora. Lumumba Bandele, who was one of the major inheritors of The East after Jitu Weusi -- one of, one of his lieutenants -- was one of the biggest people in the festival. He later became chief of staff to Roger Green, who was a State Assembly-person that I helped to serve as his lawyer--

OKECHUKWU: Adeyemi?

SIMMONS: Adeyemi Bandele is Lumumba Bandele's former--

OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

SIMMONS: Adeyemi Bandele -- and he was chief of staff for Roger Green when the proposal for the Center for Law and Social Justice came to them, and that's how the center got started. It's all connected. Believe me when I say it's all connected. And,

with a very, very generous grant from the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus -- and I had done a lot of work for the caucus pro bono, because that's just what I do, and they were happy to start -- they were happy to have the center started, and I was very happy when I was chosen. It was, it was a contest to be the first executive director, but I had, I had the right experience for it, and I was a manager; I knew how to run a nonprofit. All right, this is not technically a nonprofit, but it is a nonprofit, because we still have to raise our own funds, you know. We have the space from the college, and the telephone and IT, but if we don't bring some money in here, we don't have any programming, OK? So it's, it's important. What other things can I say about The East and the festival? The festival has honored the Center for Law and Social Justice. I just got an award from them -- right there. You see that award; Malcolm X Award? That award came for me, from -- it doesn't say the festival, but it's from the festival; the National organization— Association of Kawaida Organizations is one of the organizations that co-sponsors the festival, so -- they have a conference every year at the festival -- and, that's a Ron Karenga organization, and they honored me last year. They gave me a Malcolm X Award and everything -- you know, you get these awards, and you say, "Oh my God, I have to live up to this." [laughter] Mary McLeod Bethune -- I got a, I got a Ida B. Wells award, it's like, "Oh, Lordy!" Because these are people who are just regular people who are doing what they had to do, and I'm very proud to say that I've also received the Medgar Evers Award, because he's also someone; that I aspire to do as much as he did for our people.

OKECHUKWU: Do you remember when Weeksville was rediscovered?

SIMMONS: Yep.

OKECHUKWU: So '68, '69?

SIMMONS: Yep, I knew the original founder of Weeksville. God--

OKECHUKWU: Joan Maynard?

SIMMONS: Tell me the name.

OKECHUKWU: Joan Maynard?

SIMMONS: Joan Maynard, yeah. Joan Maynard. Joan Maynard would find anybody that

was talented and swoop them up. So, Joan Maynard found out that I was a lawyer that did volunteer work, so she had me come do a couple of volunteer things, which I was happy to do. At that point, it was nothing but the skeletons of the building and Joan Maynard's dream. It's nothing -- you've been there recently, haven't you?

OKECHUKWU: I used to work there.

SIMMONS: Oh -- at the new place? Oh. Fabulous. You know, that's what Joan had in mind. That's what Joan had in mind. I want to ask you something off the record when we finish about that, because I'm just so thrilled we -- I'm on the board of Little Sun People, and we had our 35th anniversary -- 35th ? Yeah -- 35th anniversary gala there and it was fabulous. The place was just out of this world. So, kudos to everyone who has worked there in the last ten years, because I know how long it took to get that -- yeah. So, beginning of Weeksville, I wasn't very much involved in it, but Weeksville -- Joan Maynard -- Joan Maynard had connections with Jitu, Al Vann. She was their age group, she had been around doing work for everybody, and when she started this institution, everybody, everybody chipped in to say, yes, of course. You know, I had friends that served on her board. I couldn't serve on her board, because when she asked me, I was already a governmental official, and I couldn't serve on her board, but, you know. Happy to let people know what was going on, and to -- She was also a Charles Revson Fellow, and later on, I became a Charles Revson Fellow at Columbia University, so I was happy to follow in her footsteps there. But, she's a giant; she will remain a giant, and, you know, we'll be ever singing her praises. Because she certainly did a lot to restore the dignity of the Weeksville area, and the Black community; the early free black community in Crown Heights, and our heritage in Crown Heights, and how long we've been here, and what we've done, and the free Black schools, etc. All of it needs to be unwrapped, because no, we just -- you know, the free Black community in Brooklyn and New York City is long-standing. Come on -- Crispus Attucks -- get a grip! You know? [laughter] Get a grip, folks, we've been around -- David Walker -- we've been around. No, David Walker, I think, was in Massachusetts. But, we've been around for -- beginnings of this nation, before there was a nation, and our people need

to know that. So when I was teaching African-American history and culture for several semesters here at Medgar Evers, Weeksville -- you know, Weeksville, The East, the Schomburg -- I'm trying to think of the other -- of course, the burial ground, before it was all big and spiffy, and even after -- this was before. It was just, when it was just being acknowledged, and we actually had my students do a tour before it was ever acknowledged, and during the next year it was acknowledged, and they said, "We were there!" I said, "Yeah, and they told you that we were here, and this used to be our area, so no surprise that we're buried here, OK?" So, these are Black institutions that have started up, and are continuing, and need to be supported. I'm happy to say that Medgar Evers is the second largest -- the second largest employer in Central Brooklyn, after Kings County Hospital Downstate, then it's Medgar Evers -- I'm talking about Black institutions -- and then there's Restoration. And then, everything is much, much smaller. I want Weeksville to grow up to be big like that. You know, the International Arts Festival is a nonprofit, but they don't have a base. I'm sad to say that The East -- the, the location of The East has been sold more than once, you know. They had to abandon it at one point, and the city just took it, and it's been sold, it's been sold. But, there are several other properties that belong to East, like For Our [sic] Sweet -- do you know about that?

OKECHUKWU: Mm-hmm. On Fulton?

SIMMONS: Yeah. That was a property that was bought during— in the heyday of The East. So they owned that corner property, and they owned -- they owned probably the whole block at one point, so that's a remnant -- including the corner store, which is Kalahari Flowers, which has been closed; that was also an East building, and that building is now owned by Jitu's widow. You know, it's one building, actually; where For My Sweet is and where Kalahari Flowers is, and as far as I know, she lives above. She lives in the units above. You know Angela -- do you know Angela Weusi?

OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

SIMMONS: OK, she's the owner of For My Sweet, and -- yeah. Oh, [laughter] sorry, another East family member that worked with us was one of Jitu's former wives -- I'm going to

have to get her name out of my head now. I don't have to get it out of my head; I have it in my phone book. Her name starts with an A too. She's all, she's up there now in age. She also worked with us, running our parent center for a while. So, it's a -- and we've had lots of, you know, Black radicals, December 12th Movement folks work here, you know, Sam Anderson, and -- This is a good home for people who want to continue to do the work that they're doing, and also do other community service work, or public policy work. So, you know, Roger Wareham, Latifa Carter have all worked here, other members of December 12th have worked here, and Sam Anderson has worked here as well, so it's -- Joan Gibbs, who is one of the best radical lawyers you'll ever meet; she was our general counsel for many, many years. She just retired two years ago. And, we're proud -- we're proud of our, of our alumni staff -- I'm very proud of them, and I have to say that most of them are hand-picked. They have to have the commitment before -- and the skills, not just the skills, because you can't do this work without the commitment, so it's a large part of it.

OKECHUKWU: I only have, like, a few wrap-up questions, but -- so, what do you think about Crown Heights today? What do you— You know, what comes to mind, what do you think about Crown Heights today?

SIMMONS: Re-embattled. Yeah. The battle is reengaged now, and it's reengaged from the original old front, that is, European-Americans; now, their children, and even people from out of state, you know. European-American White folks are coming into Crown Heights, and pushing the Black population out. You know, I'll be very honest with you, if Weeksville didn't stand there as an institution, and if they didn't build that up then, that was the time; it would not be able to be done now. It would have been a luxury high-rise, right across from the projects. That's why you have to do things when you can. When the opportunity is there, don't be putting it off. You have to be doing it when the opportunity is there, which is of course the genius of Joan Maynard and all the folks that came behind her at Weeksville. Similarly, like, Uhuru Sasa and Medgar Evers College, and institutions like the Center for Law and Social Justice, we have to thrive. Like I said, shrinkage is not, is not bad; shrinkage is back and forth, moving

with the time, as funding is available. As long as you keep a core staff that will continue the mission, you can continue what you need to do, and the same is true of the International African Street Festival. You know, they've been through a wave of people that were all original East people, and now, the person that's heading it up now, I'm not quite sure that he was at The East. He might have been there for a very short period of time. Maybe he was. But, keeping the commitment to the institution alive. I would love to see more of our institutions have a land base, like Medgar Evers has. I mean, having land, having a place that you consider your center or your institution's home, is very, very significant. And, we don't pay enough attention to that. I think we are so committed to doing the work, the program work, that we lose sight of how to, how to have our institutions live on in perpetuity, and the way you do that is by having a land mass, and basically staying with that, staying with that institution. And, I've helped scores— maybe not hundreds— of nonprofits get their start, and, you know, work on their boards, etc., and many of them are not in existence now because they didn't have it, or they had it and they lost it. And so, institution building is not as easy as people think. It's difficult. But, I'm happy to say that many of these institutions are still in existence. I would mention Interfaith Hospital as an institution, but that institution has never been controlled -- though it's been supported by the community, it was never controlled by the community. It started out as Brooklyn Jewish and St. John, and though the leadership of the hospital at this point is more reflective of the community, it is still very much tied to the original organizations so— and maintaining that has been difficult, because it's needed government money to stay afloat. The original institutions are not putting in money to that hospital -- neither site of the hospital, one which is in Bed-Stuy, and the other one which is smack in the middle of, of Crown Heights -- which is not a hospital anymore; it's now only ambulatory care. They've converted the hospital into coops and condos and rentals, you know, and that's -- I'm talking about Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, which is no longer a hospital. So, a good thing to maybe do is to look, a map, at a map of Crown Heights in the 1960s, and '70s -- '60s and '70s because there's something -- and pick out the institutions and where they

were, and see how many are left. Because a lot of them are no longer in existence, or they're no longer here, where they were before, and our maintaining them is going to take commitment. It's going to take a level of commitment that I think is here again, and I hate to think that one of the, one of the byproducts of the Trump election might be that people wake up and realize that we have to, we have to support these institutions, and we have to ground them in our community. You know, no moving institutions out. You know, there's no moving on up to the East Side -- this is where we need to be, and we need to maintain it.

OKECHUKWU: One of the things we want to do for this project is have -- do some mapping, on the website, maybe, so that we're engaging with places that used to be here, so we're able to map; you know, put the New Muse on there, put, you know, places that people remember as important to them in Crown Heights so we definitely want to do some--

SIMMONS: Mm-hmm, and some of the institutions that you should not miss in Crown Heights are, in addition to some of the famous synagogues -- because there were actually more synagogues before, in the earl-- in the '50s, there were more synagogues because there were more, different denominations. Now, there are less -- there are a few small Lubavitch synagogues -- small Lubavitch synagogues, but they're really just offshoots of the main one on Eastern Park-- on Empire Boul-- no, Eastern Parkway. But, there are major churches, like St. Marks -- that's a battle, you might want to talk to some of the people over there. They've been in the midst of that Crown Heights battle for a long time. They tried to get rid of them, they tried to get them, have the -- have their school closed, the church closed, because they sit right in the middle of the— what the Lubavitch like to consider— their community, and that's a remnant; it's an Episcopal church that's a remnant of a Black bourgeoisie in Crown Heights. A good school, by the way. At least, I should say, it was a good school. I don't know right now. St. Marks Day School was one of the better parochial schools in Brooklyn -- I have a nephew that went through there. Let me think of any other -- even some of the more famous small restaurants -- well, this is not Crown Heights, it's -- McDonald's Restaurant; that was in

Bed-Stuy. Let me think if I can think of anything. It just goes to show you that we -- our roots, our business roots -- oh, Paragon Credit Union.

OKECHUKWU: Where was that?

SIMMONS: Paragon Credit Union was a credit union that was started by Black folks, mostly West Indians. It was located on 1473 Fulton Street, and it gave a tremendous number of mortgages to first-home, Black mortgage -- Black homeowners in the Central Brooklyn area, including Crown Heights. Many people got their loans from Paragon, because they couldn't get a lo— a mortgage at the bank. That was an institution that was way before its time, and it died; I'd say probably it was 20 years old when it died, and it was around, around the same time as Carver, and there was another Black bank too -- I can't even remember the name of it. I can't even remember the name of it. It might have been Harlem Savings Bank.

OKECHUKWU: And when did Paragon close?

SIMMONS: Paragon closed in the '70s, and it might have been closed, you know, because again, these are enthusiastic people; most of them were professional, but they weren't bankers. So, I don't know if they really knew what they were doing, in order to stay in good standing with the FDIC, and all the rest of those folks. So, I don't know. I don't know the details of it -- I don't think there was any theft or anything going on -- but I think it went the same way as the Central Brooklyn Credit Union, OK? Very same story -- almost the same story. And that's Mark Griffith -- he's in Crown-- you talked to him, right? Have you interviewed him? He's a Crown Heights --

OKECHUKWU: He's part of the project.

SIMMONS: Oh good, good. Because he's a Crown Heights resident, too. I'm trying to think of anybody else that sort of epitomizes Crown Heights to me. I don't think that the pastor at St. Marks is the old pastor that went through all the wars; all the wars with the Lubavitch. I don't know, he should have retired by now. I'm thinking of any other big Black church. I'm not thinking of any in an— on the other side. I'm not thinking of anymore that are right around this area. It's kind of interesting to me. There's lots of storefronts, but I'm not thinking of anymore that have been around for a long time.

Maybe this one here has been around for a whi-- yeah, maybe the one that's -- it's sort of like a storefront church. It's on the corner of Eastern Parkway and Rogers -- a Seventh Day Adventist Church. And the other big Seventh Day -- they have two of them, big Seventh Day -- are on Empire Boulevard, but they are 1980, past -- they just got there -- see, when we just got there, right? They just got there. Older churches -- Bed-Stuy has all the big churches, you know.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

SIMMONS: OK.

OKECHUKWU: Well, we can -- yeah, I mean, if something comes up, you can always email me. So, being at Medgar Evers for such a long time, I know that there has been, in the past, conflict over leadership, and things like that, in talking about the sort of maintenance and the persistence of Black institutions. Could you speak -- or sort of tell me your thoughts about that in regards to Medgar Evers, and the struggles that have been here at Medgar Evers?

SIMMONS: Right, right. Well, I am not an original staff member at Medgar Evers -- there are very few of them left, but Brenda Greene, who lives in Fort Greene, is one of them, and Medgar Evers' struggles are very similar to most historically Black colleges. Although we're a predominantly Black college, we're not technically a historical Black college. And that is, there's the people who come to the institution that want to serve the community, and then there's the people who come to the institution that basically are here to be an academic. And, leadership who are not really committed to the community that they're located in. So we had several bouts of presidents; we had some excellence, and we've had some not so excellent presidents that basically were not committed to the mission of the college. That's all you can say. They just were not. Recently, we had Dr. Pollard, and he was like -- he was not committed to being at a Black college, and he wouldn't even call it a Black college, and he thought that the only thing that was important was listening to what CUNY Central said needed to happen. So it was lack of commitment to the student population coming to the school, lack of commitment to the neighborhood services, and over the years, we've had Trent, we've

had some very excellent acting -- I want to mention some of them: Dr. John, Dr. Corbie -- I know I'm forgetting one. I'm forgetting one that was really good. We had Dr. Chunn -- he didn't last very long, and then we had very long-lasting, after him, Dr. Jackson, and while there's some -- there was some displeasure with Dr. Jackson, on the most part, he was a stabilizing force for the college, and committed to its mission. The current president is committed to -- President Crew is definitely a breath of fresh air after the Pollard administration, who I thought was committed to destroying the institution, and this president is very, very committed to preserving it, as service to the community. He recently put out a really strong letter, which was -- God, where was it? It might have been in the *Times*. No, it was in the *Amsterdam News* -- calling on Black institutions to, you know, get up to snuff in terms of creating the leaders that we need to preserve our communities in these days and times, you know -- we can no longer be relying on a handful of elected officials to be towing -- you know, to be the only vanguard here. Let's get, let's get serious -- that's what institutions are for, building a crew of people, and I am absolutely behind that sentiment. So, while we've had our ups and downs, I must say that I came to Medgar Evers to run the Center for Law and Social Justice. I didn't come here to be a professor, though I certainly love the students and I have taught here when requested to, more than once. The changes that've— I've seen in the institution, in the long run, we are getting stronger and better. And, you know, we started out a senior college, we lost our senior college status, under Jackson, we gained that back, under Crew, we got something we never had, which was senior college funding -- that's under this president. We -- our campus is growing. You know, that was part of the genius of the Jackson administration; to grow new buildings, and, you know, capital, have capital campaigns -- we need that, because we, as soon as we open a new space, we're already out of space. We need more space for our student population, and we need to continue to aim our programs at shoring up our students, most of which who come into this institution not college-ready from the New York City public schools. So we really do need to continue on, you know, making sure that this is a place for them, and helping them to stay in school and graduate. That's what we're

buckling down, now; helping them to stay in school and graduate, because too many fall by the wayside due to life circumstances, you know, and we need to maintain their ability to remain as students, and to excel, and to graduate into meaningful careers, because we know there's plenty of graduates out here that aren't doing much. But Medgar Evers graduates— for the most part— have been doing pretty well, because we come out with a, with a commitment and a mission, so to speak, and we need to generate hundreds and thousands and thousands of more students like that.

OKECHUKWU: Where do you see Crown Heights in 10 years?

SIMMONS: Crown Heights in 10 years? I see -- the population -- I wish I had the actual stats for you, but the population of Crown Heights right now is approximately 70 percent White -- not even that, 80 percent White, and 20 percent -- no, now you have to define Crown Heights. What Crown Heights are you talking about? Which Crown Heights are you --

OKECHUKWU: However you defi--

SIMMONS: I want to go to the original Crown Heights, or go -- taking in, too, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, taking all that in, all of that. It's now approximately 80 percent Black, and 20 percent -- maybe 18 percent White, and 2 percent other. I'd say in ten years from now, it's going to be much closer to 60, 50 percent White, because White people are moving in in all directions. They're moving in from the east, the west, the north, and the south. So, the Black population in Crown Heights has moved further east and west -- no, further east to Brownsville, and to Canarsie; East Flatbush, Brownsville, and Canarsie. So people that started out in Crown Heights, most of which have moved to Flatbush, or then to East Flatbush, and then moved further east— if they wanted to buy a home— to Canarsie. So, you'll find that Canarsie and Brownsville, and Canarsie and East New York, are blacker areas than Bed-Stuy, Fort Greene, and Crown Heights. Absolutely. So the move, the moving is that direction. So I think that Crown Heights is going to re-- re-return to the point where it was a very integrated neighborhood, in 10 years, and in 20 years, it's going to be a very, very integrated neighborhood, and then— in, when I'm no longer on the planet— it will probably become a mostly White

neighborhood again. Except for the few Black folks that hang on to their property, it's going to be a mostly White neighborhood. Because even in the block where my family owns, White folks are now buying up houses on that block. In my lifetime -- [laughter] it's flipped twice in my lifetime, which goes to -- it tells you a little bit about how valuable New York City is. People don't understand, you know -- you don't get entire communities changing that rapidly unless there's something extremely valuable about being in Crown Heights, and the value of being in Crown Heights is we have all these wonderful institutions, you know; the Brooklyn Museum is in Crown Heights. Prospect Park and the Botanic Garden start in Crown Heights. You know? We have the Brooklyn Children's Museum; the first children's museum in the world is in Crown Heights. And of course, we have Weeksville, and our fabulous public libraries, including the Grand public, Grand Army Plaza. So, you know, the most grandiose parts of Brooklyn are in Crown Heights. The gem -- what do they call it? They call it the jewels of Brooklyn -- are all in Crown Heights. So there's something extremely valuable here. For me to say that I knew Prospect Park in and out, particularly the area on this side of the lake -- I didn't know too much about Prospect Park West until I was an adult, but I knew Prospect Park East like the back of my hand. I can sit here and tell you exactly how to get from one place to the other. You go to -- you want to go to the pagoda? You go this way, you turn left, when you see the grove of trees, you go that path there, you get into the main area, which is the picnic ground, you keep walking alongside that road that goes upward -- it's not -- it's paved, but there's no signs or anything -- and you will find yourself at the lake, or whatever -- or whatever, you know? It's -- so, you know, that kind of thing, you know. I was never in the Botanic Garden children's garden -- I always wanted to be in that. You know, my parents said, "You have a garden -- it's right there in the backyard." And we had a garden in the backyard. That's why I'm a gardener now. "You want to do something? You can pull those weeds over there." [laughter] "We don't need you to be going up there and planting something for the public -- plant right here." So, the housing stock, and I'm not just talking about historic neighborhoods -- most of the neighborhoods now, you know;

Crown Heights North, Crown Heights South, they're both historic. And, I don't even know if my family's house -- I think that's in a historic district too now. I mean, so the housing stock is excellent, beautiful; all the details, you know, the floors, the ceilings, the woodwork, and restored or unrestored, they're just jewels. And, the neighborhood feeling remains, even though Ebinger's and that -- and the German deli may be gone, they still have a neighborhood feel to them, you know. I can tell people -- people know -- what I can tell people, if they know where they are, if I tell them, you know, "Have you been to Gloria's In and Out?" That's what I'll say to them before I've— Gloria's. You know, the original Gloria's In and Out, which is a very famous Caribbean restaurant -- takeout place, and now not just takeout -- it's in Crown Heights; Nostrand and Empire. And one of the most famous bakeries is just short of Crown-- actually, it is still in Crown Heights. You know, Conrad's Bakery? And the big one up there on Empire, on Utica -- there's another very famous Caribbean bakery -- Utica and Eastern Parkway. These are things that -- people come to the city for the West Indian Day Parade, and they, they can't wait to get there. I can be snobbish, and say, "Ah, I don't want the patties from that place, I want it from here," or "I don't like this" -- and I am like that, too, you know -- "Eh, those are Bajan patties. I want Jamaican patties, or Trini patties." I had a Trini patty the other day, which was out of this world. Or, you know, or where I'm going to buy my roti. You know, I'm very, very selective. But, these are things that people come from all over the world to have, and I'm talking about this, but it's also true -- you know, you go to the Lubavitch community -- you know, I'm one of these people that will go into their supermarket, because they have the best kosher marshmallows! My friends -- "Esme, where did you get those?" "Uh, the Jewish community in Crown Heights." And I will be very honest with you and tell you that my mother bought all of our clothing when we were young, straight out of, straight out of that community, because they had all the stuff from Orchard Street there. You know, and she would talk to them about what the cost of it was, and, you know, the whole thing. My grandmother was, you know, a Garment District worker, they know -- they knew clothing. So, you know, there are so many benefits here, and not just for the

Black community, but for -- at large, but for anybody that wants to come. And, the fact that we're sitting on top of this property, the fact that we have a heritage here, that we have institutions here, that we call this home -- I'm proud. I'm proud of it. I'll tell anybody, in the beginning. They say, "Oh, where you from?" I tell them I'm from Crown Heights. I tell them in a minute. "Oh, really? I thought you were from--" I say, "No, no, no, no, no, I'm not from Bed-Stuy." That's the sort of -- that's my adult home. My family, and all of us, we are Crown Heights folks, and it -- People, when you say that, people; most Black folks in New York City know, therefore, what you're made of, because they know what the embattlement that was going on continuously, continuously. Now, there are two people I want you to meet, and if we don't hurry, we're not going to get to meet.

OKECHUKWU: So, yeah, is there anything else you want to say?

SIMMONS: I want to -- I want to give you the number for -- Bill Howard, who served as a staff person to Shirley Chisholm. I strongly recommend that you look up Leslie McHolder -- there's a street named after him.

OKECHUKWU: Leslie McHolder?

SIMMONS: Yes. Leslie McHolder was one of the Paragon people. He was also the chief political analyst behind Shirley Chisholm, and he is -- he was a political genius. I don't know where he's from. I don't know where he's, where he came -- what his heritage is from. He's an immigrant. And I want to introduce you to Donna Mossman, who is here -- so, I want to take you over there to see her.

OKECHUKWU: Wait, let me take your mic off.

SIMMONS: Sure.